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ROMANCES

SEPTEMBER

THE WIDOW MAKER
by Francis Flick

THEY CALLED ME KILLER-KATE

ALL NEW STORIES

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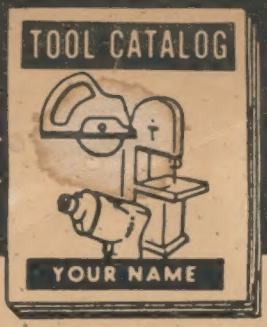

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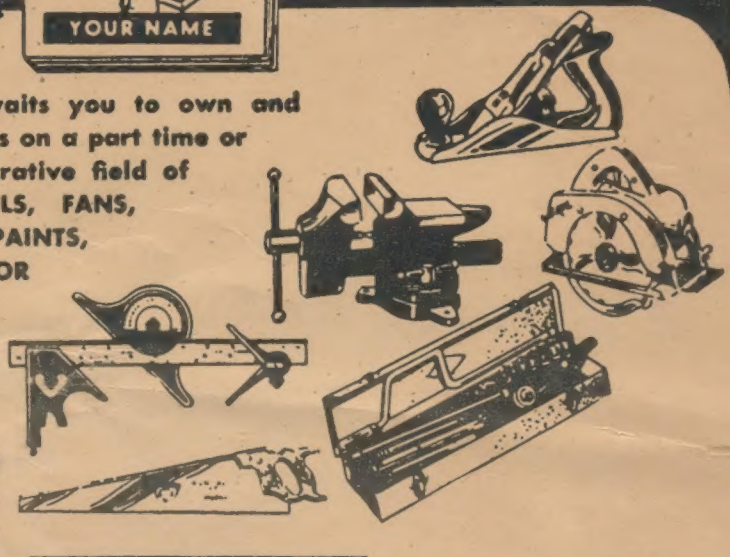

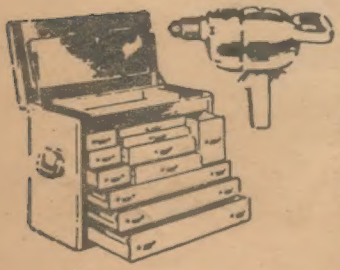

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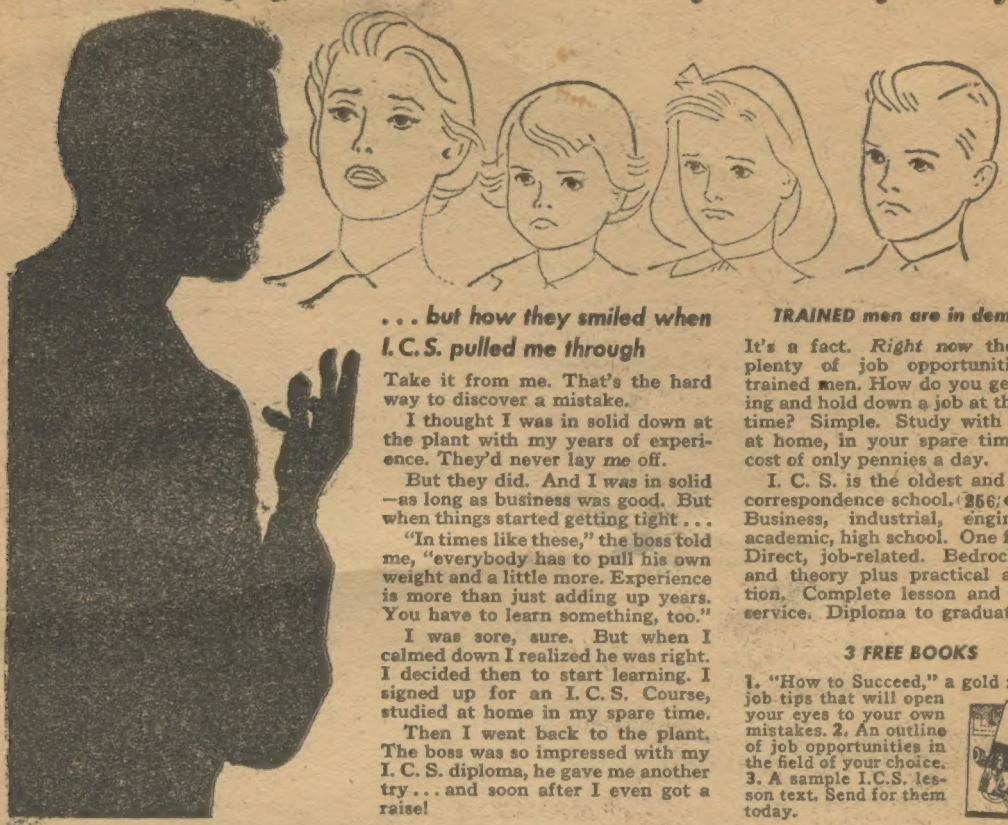

. . . but how they smiled when I.C.S. pulled me through

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REAL WESTERN ROMANCES

BRAND NEW LOVE STORIES OF THE WEST

Volume 6 September, 1956 Number 5

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Kim had taught me how to draw and shoot. I'd hated it, but I tried to be good at it, because he wanted me to.

THEY CALLED ME KILLER KATE

Complete Novelette

Wanted—Dead or Alive
Kate Dawson
Reward—$5,000 Pesos

SOMETIMES I wake up in the middle of the night with that horrible dodger sign blazed across my mind. I lay there shivering with the dreadful knowledge that it's me they're hunting for. Kate Dawson, with a price on her head. Kate Dawson—killer, murderess.....

It started on the last trip that Pa and me made up the Rio Grande in our old stern-wheel paddle tub, the *Texas Lady*. I remember our third night out of Brownsville. The Texas stars were up there, twinkling so hot and bright. I was down on the lower deck with my face turned into the breeze. I could see the Texas deck and the upper rigging outlined against the stars and the high smoke stacks spitting a shower of sparks into the velvet blackness. The stern paddles were making a soothing, swishing sound and the bull frogs were croaking on the bank.

It was the kind of peaceful, warm night that makes a nineteen year old girl feel both happy and sad at the same time. I was happy because the *Texas Lady* was my home, and my Pa was up in the wheel house. But I was kind of sad too. Kind of lonely sad because it was such a pretty night and I was down on the deck all by myself.

And then all of a sudden I wasn't by myself.

I heard another swishing sound, beside the big paddles turning. Pa had taught me to be alert for sounds like that because this was rugged border brush country. More than once we'd been jumped by border renegades from both sides of the river that wanted to steal from the supplies in our floating general store.

I spun around, my hand going like lightning to the .44 I always packed on my side.

But a pair of strong arms caught me and dragged me up against a broad, strong chest and pinned me there so I couldn't get to my gun. And before I could yell for Pa, a pair of lips came down on mine.

Then, a minute later there was a soft chuckle in my ears.

My heart was banging away, first from fright and then from anger... because I knew that chuckle. I squirmed hopelessly in the powerful arms and gritted my teeth. "Kim Sallings," I gasped. "You ain't got the sense of a mule!"

"Sure I ain't," he agreed, still chuckling. "Or I wouldn't keep chasin' a little hornet like you!"

He finally let go and I stepped back. My knees were a little trembly —they always got that way when he kissed me even though I hated him and I knew he was no-count.

I looked up at him, outlined there in the dim light of the stars and it wasn't hard to understand why he could make a girl go weak in the knees. He was awfully tall and wide-shouldered and rangy like a strong lariat that was coiled and ready to whip out. And he had a careless wave in his sunbleached hair and an even more careless grin in his eyes.

You looked at the grin in his eyes and you knew he just plumb didn't give a hang. Not about anything—including law and order or his own neck. That's why he'd pull a tom-fool stunt like waiting out on a sand bar and wading out as the *Texas Lady* went by.

I TURNED away from him, mad at myself for the melting feeling I got from his touch. "Well, I hear you're in trouble again. I heard all about it in Brownsville. This time they say you killed a man in Monterrey." I felt my throat growing tight. "That's a new record for you, ain't it, Kim? You never killed a man in Monterrey before...."

He was quiet for a short spell, then he said softly, "A man once gets himself a reputation, he gets credit for a lot of things he didn't do. Suppose I tell you I didn't kill that gunslinger in Monterrey—that I was in San Antonio at the time."

"I wouldn't believe you," I said wearily.

He sighed softly. "You see? So what's the use in me tellin' you?"

I spun around. "You sure take me for bein' awful dumb, Kim. Comin' around all the time, actin' so innocent. And all the time you got a price on your head and a reputation for bein' the worst killer on the border—" Tears flooded my eyes and my voice choked, because it hurt me to say things like this to Kim Sallings whom I'd known since childhood.

His eyes looked kinda sad there in the darkness. "Sometimes a man crosses a river," he said softly. "It's forced upon him to kill somebody and when he does he crosses a river. And then it's different on the other side because he's got him a reputation. Just a little reputation. But there's a little man on that side of the river with a reputation too and this little man comes around with his gun. And then a man crosses another river and there's a bigger man with a gun....."

His hands went out in the dark and touched my arms. "It's a hard land here, Kate, honey. A man's got to be hard to abide in it—"

He pulled me closer and there was gentleness in his kiss now. "Go away with me, Kate honey," he whispered softly. "Go away with me to San Francisco where there's a new land, where folks don't know me."

The trembling was back in my body again but I fought it. "It's no use, Kim," I whispered through a hurting in my throat. "It would follow you wherever you go. A woman's got more to think of than just love. She's got a home and a safe place for her children to think of. That's why I can't go with you."

He was so still I couldn't hear him breathing. Then he said, "That's what you really want, ain't it, Kate? A safe, good home and your children growin' up, respectable and safe. That's what you always wanted. I remember when you were a little girl playin' with your dolls, you made believe that way—"

"Yes. What's the use sayin' it ain't so? All my life, I've been driftin'. Pa —gambling, workin' a spell here and there. I never had a real place I could

call home 'till he won this ol' riverboat in a poker game in New Orleans. I want a real home sure, but more important I can't bring children into the world to grow up and know their Pa is a killer and an outlaw with a price on his head—"

Kim was slowly shaking his head in the dark, looking down at me with the loneliness and sadness in his eyes. "I could change, Kate. Out in California it would be different. Someday I hope I can make you believe that as much as I do...."

He bent and his lips touched mine again and a fire went through my body and then he was gone, slipping over the side like a shadow.

I watched the place he'd gone, with a tear trickling from my eyes. Kim and I had played together as children. I'd played with my dolls and he'd played with his toy gun his Pa'd whittled out of a piece of white pine for him. And when he was big enough, he played with a real gun, only it wasn't play. There was a seriousness in his face that scared me as he practiced shooting rocks and cans. He taught me how to shoot and draw, too. I'd hated it, but I tried to be good at it because Kim wanted me to.

THEN ONE day he rode off. I didn't hear from him for over a year and then I heard that he'd gotten into some trouble in a saloon in Victoria. He'd shot a man and there was a warrant out for him. Pa and I traveled around a lot. From time to time, Kim would come to see me like he did tonight. There was the same old careless grin in his eyes. But a tightness and a wariness, too, like a hunted animal. And the stories about him grew worse until he had the name of being the fastest man with a gun on the Texas border.

I was sorry because I guess as a child I'd loved Kim. But the things that had happened since had killed all chance for that love and the loneliness in me was looking, hoping for someone else now.

A week later, we tied up near Laredo, and there the dream I carried close to my heart came true.....

We tied up early in the morning. By noon the lower deck was packed with customers. Word always spread through the brush country that we were coming. So when we found a likely spot on a bank and tied up, Pa gave two toots on the whistle and before you could shake a stick there was ranchers and cow hands and Indians popping out of the brush like jackrabbits, all fighting to get on board and see the wonderful things we had to sell.

You see there wasn't much in the way of stores in this part of the country. Supplies had to be brought overland by mule train, either from San Antonio on the Texas side, or Monterrey on the Mexican side. It was a long, dangerous trip through desert country and not many tried it. So, folks were lucky if they could buy the most essential things from their stores.

That's why we'd made such a success. We bought all kinds of wonderful things from New Orleans boats that landed at Brownsville. New fangled sewing machines, fancy lamp chimneys, bolts of cloth from France, canned peaches, stuff like that. Why, you oughta seen the eyes of some of those brush poppers. My heart came up in my throat and choked me when I'd see the awesome shine in the eyes of those poor dried-up, stringy women when they wistfully touched a pretty ribbon or a pair of reading spectacles. Lots of times I knew they could never afford to buy those things and I sneaked around when Pa wasn't lookin' and let them have something for less than it cost us.

Pa never could figure out why we could sell so much and still make such little profit!

BUT THIS trip suddenly began to look like we were really goin' to rake in the pot for a change. We'd tied up and Pa gave his usual two hoots on the whistle. Then pretty soon what comes across the river from the Mexican side but a whole parade of the finest horses all sleeked and groomed. And sittin' astride those horses were the most elegant dressed cowboys I'd ever laid my eyes on. Their saddles were sparkling with silver inlay and conchos. They wore giant broad-brimmed hats with high-peaked crowns. And you shoulda seen the fancy embroidery and stitching on their shirts!

Pa got so excited he nearly fell off the deck. "Those are *vaqueros* from the Los Animos *rancho!*" he gasped. "That's the biggest *hacienda* in this end of Mexico and the *patron* that owns it, Don Valdez is one of the richest men in Mexico!"

Pa and me fell all over ourselves getting our wares all straightened out and ready in the cabin on the main deck which served as our store. Then in came this delegation, all polite and sweeping their hats off and bowing.

The head of the bunch turned out to be the eldest son of old Don Valdez himself. His name was Ramon Valdez, a dashing, handsome guy in his early twenties.

"*Buenos dias, senor,*" I started off in my fumbling Tex-mex.

His straight white teeth flashed in a friendly smile. "With me you may talk English, *Senorita.* I graduated from one of your fine colleges in the East."

I blushed clear down to my toes. I never had any trouble chattering away a mile a minute with anybody I met. But I was suddenly tongue-tied with this guy. He was so smooth and polished. He made me think of a storybook prince or something—and I guess in a way that's what he was in his country. His father was the overlord of thousands of acres and, according to Spanish custom, as the eldest son Ramon would inherit it all one day.

He got busy then picking out items for his father's ranch. My shyness left as I helped him, and pretty soon we were talking like old friends. When he got through he'd just about bought us out. Pa was wall-eyed, counting all the money we'd just made.

His men loaded up all the goods and left. At the door, Ramon paused. "*Senorita,* this week-end we are having a big fiesta on my father's *hacienda.* We would be very honored if you would come as our guest."

My mouth gaped open. I shot a glance at Pa and he nodded. "Why—that'd be mighty nice," I stammered. "I'd be plumb tickled, Mr. Valdez."

He smiled. "Please. By now we are good enough friends so you should call me Ramon." His hand gave my fingers a warm squeeze. "My *vaqueros* will come for you on Friday afternoon and escort you to our ranch."

He left me feeling like a Cinderella that'd just been invited to a royal ball. I spent the next two days sewing up a party dress out of our prettiest bolt of blue cloth. It was just the right shade of blue for my corn-silk blonde hair and blue eyes. On Friday, while I was waiting impatiently for my escort to the ranch Pa said to me, "Kate, I'm glad you got invited to this shindig. A girl ought to have the chance to go to parties and I know you ain't had much of a chance for that kind of thing knockin' around the country with your old worthless Pa. The Valdez's are fine, aristocratic people and they'll treat you good. But remember one thing: you don't own all that land and people by bein' soft. Old man Valdez can be hard as nails and mean as a rattle snake if you get him riled, so you mind your manners."

"Yes Pa," I said dutifully.

FOUR O'CLOCK that afternoon, here came the *vaqueros* again, this time with a buckboard that had a fancy awning to keep the sun off. Pa called it a surrey. I never seen anything so fancy in my whole life!

I sat up there like the queen of England and the *vaqueros* rode around me, singing and laughing through miles of dusty brush country, through the mesquite, the *retama, junco* and cactus of the *monte*. And then we came into a valley, all green and pretty like a little Garden of Eden in the desert and there were the white 'dobe walls around the main buildings of the *hacienda*.

When I met Don Valdez and his wife, Senora Valdez, I remembered what Pa had said. Don Valdez was a big man who carried himself erect like a king, and he had gray hair and a glowing gray mustache. He had the most elegant, gracious manners I have ever seen. But I could see in the back of his eyes a hardness like flint. Nobody had to tell me that he ruled his brush country kingdom and his household with a fist of iron.

That night the fiesta began. Lighted jack-o-lanterns hung from trees in the patio. A string orchestra and singers filled the warm night air with music. Tables groaned with food. Valdez cousins poured into the ranch by the wagon load. There were dozens of beautiful girls but Ramon Valdez gave all his attention to me. We danced and there was something breathtaking in his touch and the way his eyes lingered on my face.

Late that night when the dancing was over and I was in my room about to go to bed, there was a tap at my window. It scared me. But I opened it a crack—and I saw Ramon.

"I couldn't sleep without one more good-night," he explained with a smile.

We talked in soft whispers across the window sill and before I knew it our hands were touching. And then he suddenly bent closer. I felt a dizzy flush sweep over me, a feeling of panic. *I shouldn't let him kiss me so soon,* I thought wildly. But I didn't have the strength to move. And then his lips were on mine, warm, eager.

My mind was in such a spin I couldn't sleep. This was happening so quick! Could you fall in love so quick? I wished Pa was here so I could ask him....

The next day Ramon took me all over the ranch. I was used to riding in levis, astride like a man, but I knew Mexican custom would be shocked so I wore a dress and rode side-saddle like a lady. It was a perfect day and there seemed to be a rosy glow around the two of us, shutting off the rest of the world.

But something happened late that afternoon that showed me another side of Ramon—a side that could be as hard as his father. We had ridden by one of the corrals and Ramon suddenly stiffened as he saw a peon ranch hand beating a horse.

Ramon swung off his horse. He went over to the man, snapping an order. The peon cursed him and Ramon's voice rose sharply. Suddenly, I saw Ramon grab the whip out of the man's hand and slash it across his face. His arm rose and fell until the peon was a groveling, bloody heap at his feet. I turned my face away, sick at my stomach. But I couldn't forget the look in that beaten man's eyes. If I'd ever seen raw, naked murder in a man's eyes it had been then....

Ramon got back on his horse and we rode away. He was silent for a while and then he said, "I am sorry, *mi corrazon* that you had to see such unpleasantness. Sometimes these peons have to be treated like bad children."

Pa's words came back to me again. *"You don't own all that land and people by bein' soft."*

I could see how right he'd been. The Valdez family were good to their

people, but they were strict and hard, too.

I tried to put it out of my mind, to recapture the rosy excitement of being treated like a princess. That night there was more music and dancing in the patio. Ramon's touch was more thrilling than ever. He was so gentle and sweet that it was almost impossible to remember he had beaten a man half to death this afternoon. It seemed like a bad dream and in the thrill of the evening I'd almost pushed it completely out of my mind.

Once when we were dancing close, Ramon whispered in my ear, "Tonight, *mi corrazon,* I am going to come to your window for another goodnight. Will you open the window when I tap?"

A hot flush crept up my throat. I looked down at a pearl button on his fancy vest. "Why don't you try and see?" I whispered.

Was Ramon falling in love with me, too? Was he going to propose to me? Was this my life-long dream coming true? It was too impossible. Things like this happened in story-books, not to real people. But maybe it was going to happen! Maybe I'd have what I'd always hoped for, a respectable husband, a secure home where I could raise children....

That night in my room I waited for Ramon. I felt as if there were soft, pink clouds all around my heart, lifting it up.

HIS TAP came at the window. My heart was suddenly racing and my knees trembled. This time when I opened it, Ramon swung over the sill and stood beside me in my room.

"You shouldn't come *in,*" I said nervously. "What would your parents think—it...it ain't proper, Ramon—"

His arms went around me. "They are asleep, sweetheart," he whispered against my hair. "And why isn't it proper for two people in love to be together?"

"Love—" I looked up at him wide-eyed. "Ramon—"

"Yes, in love," he repeated. And his lips found mine, hungrily, eagerly.

I had never felt like this in my whole life...so weak, so powerless. It was frightening and wonderful all rolled up together. I knew it wasn't proper for us to be here this way.

"I love you, Kate," he repeated breathlessly between kisses. "I love you—"

"I love you too, Ramon," I whispered. Then I pushed him away. "Ramon—" I gasped. "This is wrong. Please—"

"Wrong? But you just told me you loved me."

"I—I do. But we aren't married Ramon. We can't be here alone—"

His strong arms held me down. "Listen to me, Kate," he whispered in my ear. "And please try to understand. You come from another country. You do not know all the ways of my people. When you are the eldest son of a rich land owner in Mexico you cannot always chose your wife. My father and his brother have planned a marriage between me and my cousin, Louisa, since we were little children. This marriage will bring together two of the biggest *haciendas* in all Mexico. Love has nothing to do with it, but I must do as my father wishes—"

The words hammered at my ears. It was like a terrible, unreal dream, like the beating I'd witnessed this afternoon. I couldn't quite believe it. Tears of bewildered disappointment filled my eyes. All the romantic dreams came crashing down. I trembled with heart-broken rage. "Get out of my room, you—you polecat!" I sobbed.

"Kate—listen to me—"

"Get out...get out...get out—" I screamed.

"Kate. . .please, they'll hear you all over the ranch—"

At that precise moment there was a sound at the window. Ramon turned that way. I had a fleeting glimpse of a dark figure swinging over the sill, into the room. The man uttered a single swear word, *"Cabron!"* Then I was blinded and deafened by the crash of gunfire in the small room.

Before my dazed eyes, Ramon clutched at his chest, stumbled, and crashed to the floor. The dark figure loomed before me. Something hit me a stunning blow and my mind went blank.

WHEN I OPENED my eyes, the room was filled with lamplight. Through a daze I saw the horrified faces of house servants. They were dressed in night shirts and night gowns, holding lamps and babbling like crazy. I realized that I'd fallen across the bed. Groggily I got to my feet. I felt something heavy in my right hand and I stared blankly down at a gun I was holding. How it had gotten into my hand I didn't know.

The servants were pointing toward Ramon's body and at me. One of the men turned and dashed down the hall.

I was still so confused from the blow that I couldn't make any sense out of what was happening. I opened my hand and the gun tumbled to the floor. I stared at Ramon's body.

One of the women servants screamed nasty words accusingly at me in Mexican. A man beside her suddenly began walking menacingly toward me. Fright raced through me, clearing the daze from my mind in a flash.

I'd knocked around with Pa enough to know danger when I smelled it. Quickly, I bent and scooped up the .45 that I'd just dropped. The man stopped as I swung the gun toward him. He took one look at the way I was holding the gun and he saw that I knew how to use it and he didn't come any closer.

I wiped my free hand across my eyes. This whole thing seemed like a crazy dream and I wished I could wake up. As well as I could figure out, the servants must have busted into the room when they heard the gunshot and figured *I'd* just shot Ramon. It sure looked that way. The murderer who'd come through the window must have knocked me across the bed and put the gun in my hand.

I was so filled with panic I could think of only one thing. . .getting out of there. I waved the frightened servants away from the door and I ran out into the hall. I got halfway to the end of the long corridor when four men appeared from around a corner. It was the servant who'd dashed out of my room, Ramon's father, Ramon's younger brother, Lupe, and the ranch foreman.

Mr. Valdez's face was gray with anguish and fury. He raised a shaking finger. "You little piece of baggage," he screamed in Mexican. "We bring you here as our guest—you repay me by killing my son—"

The foreman raised his rifle with a curse.

I tried to beg them to listen to me but old man Valdez was like a bull in an insane rage. "Shoot her!" he cried.

The man squinted down the rifle barrel aimed at my heart and his finger tightened on the trigger.

There was no time even to think. I shot from the hip, the way Kim had taught me to do when I was a girl. The foreman spun around and his rifle clattered to the floor.

I'd temporarily saved my life, but I'd also put a stamp on my guilt. Now I'd never be able to convince them I was innocent of Ramon's death. There was nothing left to do but run.

I found an open door and ran into the night. Lupe Valdez was the closest to me. He was a slim young man, not

nearly as handsome as Ramon. I'd seen him only a few times before; he stayed mostly in the background at the family gatherings. But now he went into action and tried frantically to grab me. I ducked under his fingers and then I was out in the ranch yard.

Luckily, it was very cloudy and dark that night. People were yelling and lamps were flickering all over the house. I fumbled my way down to the corral. There I was in real luck. I found a horse saddled and tied to a hitch rail—probably belonging to one of the vaqueros who'd just ridden in.

I swung into the saddle and got out of that ranch yard as fast as the stallion could move.

IT WAS near dawn when I reached the river. The tired horse crossed a fording place to where the *Texas Lady* was tied up. I roused Pa, blurting out the whole terrible story. We went right to work, getting up steam. Soon we were headed back down the Rio Grande as fast as that old stern wheeler could paddle. But that wasn't nearly fast enough to suit me. The *Texas Lady* was a slow old tub and we had to be careful of the many treacherous sand bars.

All that day, we watched the banks on both sides, afraid that every time a bush moved it was the Valdez riders coming after me. But that day passed and the following night. Neither Pa nor me slept a wink. We kept loaded rifles close by as we steamed through the night. Forty-eight hours passed and there was no sign of pursuit. My hopes began to rise.

It was near sundown that second day when we rounded a bend in the river and saw up ahead a horseman strike out across a shallow gravel bar toward our boat.

I grabbed my rifle and stepped out of the wheel house onto the Texas deck where I could draw a bead and I fired a warning shot near his head.

He drew rein abruptly, yanked his hat off, and yelled. I caught sight of tumbling blonde hair and the shifting breeze carried his swear words our way. My heart turned a flip.

"Kim!" I cried. "Kim Sallings!"

I'd never been so glad to see anybody in my whole life!

Pa slowed the boat and Kim drew his horse up to the rail and swung from his saddle to the deck. He ran up to the Texas deck still swearing, because I'd nearly shot him. But when he confronted me on the deck he started grinning. He put his hands on his hips and slowly ran his gaze from my head to my feet.

"What are you gawkin' at, Kim Sallings?" I demanded angrily.

"I just wanted to get a good look at 'Killer Kate', the most dangerous woman on the Texas border," he drawled. Then he took a folded paper from his shirt pocket, handed it to me. "Everybody on the border is talkin' about Killer Kate, the girl that murdered Ramon Valdez in the heat of a lovers' quarrel."

My ears were burning as my trembling fingers tore open the paper. It was a "wanted" dodger. The kind they post for outlaws. The words screamed up at me—

WANTED—DEAD OR ALIVE
FOR MURDER
KATE DAWSON
REWARD—$5,000 Pesos

Then followed a description of me.

"Old man Valdez has plastered these all over the border," Kim went on. "Every bounty hunter, sheriff, and gunslinger on both sides of the river is lookin' for you, gal, aimin' to collect himself that fat purse. You sure got yourself in a mess," he observed.

Tears rushed to my eyes. "Kim, it isn't *true*. You have to believe me. I didn't kill anybody—I *couldn't*—"

"I don't know," Kim grinned in his maddening, mocking way. "You sure

got an itchy trigger finger. You put that Winchester slug awful close to my ear a few minutes ago."

"Kim! This is no time for tom foolishness!" I sobbed.

Pa came out of the wheelhouse to join us. His face looked tense and lined from the strain of piloting that old tub so many hours without rest. "Kim, I'm mighty glad to see a friend, son," he said, shaking hands with Kim warmly. "Do you think we got a chance to make it down to Brownsville?"

KIM'S FACE sobered. He shook his head. "That's why I headed you off here, Mr. Dawson. Valdez has got a blockade set up across a shallow part of the river a few miles down from here. You would have run smack into it in a few hours."

"Then we're mighty grateful to you for stopping us!" Pa gasped.

Kim looked my way with a crooked grin. "I've kinda got attached to that brat of yours, Mr. Dawson," he said softly. "Reckon I'd miss her if anything happened to her...."

The old trembling feeling went through me when Kim looked at me that way. I didn't know how it was possible to like a guy and stay mad at him most of the time the way I did with Kim!

"You know this border country and the people in it better than anybody else, Kim," Pa said. "What would you advise us to do?"

"Well, I ain't kidding you any, Mr. Dawson, we're in a tight spot. Valdez is a powerful man and he's got a powerful thing driving him—revenge for his son's death. But, I been in tight spots before. I figure our best bet is to take Kate off the boat here. I got friends near here that'll hide her for a couple of days. Then she can take the stage to San Antonio."

So, a few minutes later I was beside Kim on his horse, riding away from the river. Pa was going to take the boat on down the river. It might help confuse Valdez when he searched the boat and didn't find me on it. Pa, of course, would give him a story about me not coming back to the boat at all after I ran away from the Valdez ranch.

As I rode with Kim, I told him the entire story of the shooting just the way it happened.

"This *hombre* who crawled through the window. Do you have any idea who he might be?"

"Yes, I think so." I told Kim about the peon that Ramon had beaten that same afternoon. "That man wanted to kill Ramon, Kim. I saw it in his eyes."

Kim nodded thoughtfully. He took me to a shack on the river bottom where a Mexican family, friends of his lived. This was to be my hiding place until I took the stage.

"I'm goin' to ride back up toward Laredo and see what I can find out about that shooting," Kim told me. "I got a lot of friends on both sides of the river. If that peon shot Ramon I can find him and get the truth out of him."

I looked up at Kim, so tall and rangy on his horse. I reached up and put my hand on his. "Be careful."

His smile turned bitter. "This Ramon Valdez was a handsome hombre. Were you in love with him, Kate?"

A flush stung my cheeks. "He kinda swept me off my feet," I said in a low voice. "But I found out he was nothing but a polecat—"

The bitterness left Kim's smile and he bent low and gave me a thorough kiss. "If I'm not back in a couple of days, you catch that stage for San An-

tonio alone." He waved and then was gone.

THE NEXT two days I stayed in the little shack of Juan Perron, his wife and five children. They were kind, simple people. Kim had once done them a great favor and they would die for him, so I felt very safe in the little river bottom shack.

The night before I was to catch the stage I went out on the porch for a breath of fresh air. I saw the shape of men down by the corral. Then I heard hoof beats drum away.

Juan Perron came up on the porch, very agitated. "Senorita, stay inside," he said, almost pushing me. "Een the moonlight your hair shines like silver...."

I did as he ordered. "What's wrong, Juan. Did someone out there see me?"

He shrugged, but his eyes darted apprehensively toward the darkness. "I am not sure, senorita. My cousin Alfredo was out there at the corral. He is not a good man. He rode off all of a sudden. I looked up here an' saw your hair shining like silver in the moonlight. I do not know, Senorita...."

He shook his head, muttering to himself as he went back out to the porch. I noticed that he picked up his rifle as he went out.

I slept uneasily that night. Early the next morning, Juan hitched up his buckboard and took me into a nearby town to catch the San Antonio stage. His wife had disguised me in one of her long dresses and a black lace mantilla over my face. On the way I looked anxiously for Kim but there was no sign of him. I had to board the stage alone.

The stage coach rolled out of the little town, along a dusty road through the chaparral covered wasteland. The sun beat down on the hot sand, the lizzards and rattlesnakes. Off in the cloudless sky, two buzzards wheeled gracefully.

As the miles rolled by I sat tensely in my corner of the seat worrying about what could have happened to Kim?

It was near ten o'clock that morning when the posse caught up with us. I first noticed a cloud of dust off to the right. It grew larger and then I saw the large body of riders.

My heart began pounding. A cold emptiness clutched at me. The riders caught up with the stage. There were pistol shots and yells. The stage slowed and came to a dead halt.

The next moment the stage door was jerked open and an armed man ordered all the passengers out of the coach. I recognized the man as one of Valdez's vaqueros.

When I stepped down from the coach that morning I didn't have a hope left. My knees were shaky, but I kept my chin up. I wasn't going to give these skunks the pleasure of seeing how scared I was!

I looked up at the men on horseback and there was Valdez, himself, giving orders. He looked over the passengers, then ordered one of his men to jerk off my mantilla. When he did, and my blonde hair spilled free in the sunlight, a cry went up from the posse. One of the frightened passengers pointed a trembling finger at me. "It's that woman they got the reward out fer!" he gasped. "It's Killer Kate!"

Valdez's face looked like cold granite. At his orders, his men took me down a ravine where there was some mesquite trees growing. One of them tied my hands behind me and the other threw his lariet noose around my neck and tossed the other end over a mesquite limb and drew it tight.

It was easy to figure what had happened. Juan Perron's cousin, Alfredo, who had seen me on Juan's porch last night had high-tailed it to Valdez, hoping to collect some of that reward.

OLD MAN Valdez sat up on his horse, watching the preparations for the necktie party. He snapped another order and I felt the rope snap tight around my neck. My knees buckled from under me and I fainted.

I guess I swooned for only a few seconds. In the distance I heard some shots. I opened my eyes and I was on the ground. The rope was still around my neck, but it wasn't tight any more. I sat up weakly. And the first thing I saw was Kim Sallings, sitting high and arrogant on his horse, with a pair of smoking six-guns in his hands!

If I ever loved the sight of Kim Sallings in my life, it was that moment!

He was arguing with old man Valdez, and backing up his arguments with the guns. Behind him was a band of riders, equal to Valdez's bunch, and they had their guns handy too. Some of Kim's outlaw friends, I figured.

"There ain't no point in stringing up that girl," Kim drawled. "She didn't kill your boy, Senor Valdez. You want the real murderer, don't you?"

"Of course she killed Ramon!" Valdez snapped. "My servants found her with the gun."

Kim shook his head. "A man came through the window that night, shot Ramon, knocked Kate dizzy and put the gun in her hand."

Valdez's eyes widened. "How do you expect me to believe a wild story like that?"

"I've got the proof," Kim said. "And—I've got the real killer."

A murmur swept through the vaqueros.

"Kate thought it was a peon that Ramon had beaten the same day he was killed," Kim went on. "I crossed the border to your hacienda. I have some friends on your ranch. With their help we found the peon that was beaten. He didn't kill Ramon, but he knew who did. So did other peons on

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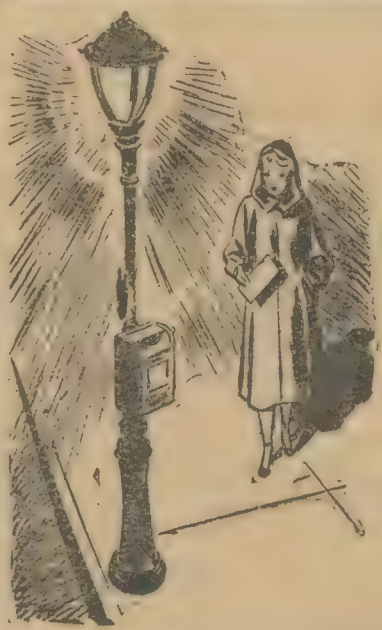


A Romantic Featured Tale

HE WAS ALLERGIC TO ORANGE BLOSSOMS

by Garold Hartsock

is in the September issue of

GAY LOVE STORIES

Stephanie was openly hostile to Jim, and it was she who tagged him, "the Widow-Maker"

THE WIDOW-MAKER

by FRANCIS FLICK

Complete Novelette

JIM TARRANT rode his bag roan into town with long accustomed familiarity. He jogged through the ankle deep dust knowing he was being watched from windows, from saloons, from anywhere that scum gathered. Word of his arrival in Bannock Springs had preceded him, but he gave no indication of his knowledge of the scrutiny except in the anger smouldering behind his flinty gray eyes.

He tied his horse to the *Mansion House* hitching rail and picked up his saddle bags. Taller than most men, he walked without hurry to the hotel and no watching eye could mistake his sure confidence, or miss the two black handled guns slung low.

The railhead cowtown was bustling this torrid Saturday afternoon. Cowhands were in from the range to drop their wages at the gambling tables and at the bars. Couples, with children tagging along the planked walk, went into the mercantile and the other false fronted stores. But behind this normal activity Jim could feel the sinister fear brooding over this town ruled now by outlaws and gunmen. Hell, he could smell it.

Inside the goomy lobby he dropped his saddlebags on the counter and looked at the boy behind it. "I'd like a room as cool as you got," he said in a softly courteous voice.

"That'll be number six." The boy turned the register around and watched while he signed Jim Tarrant in wide bold strokes.

"Keep my saddlebags until I come back," he said and walked out into the broiling sun. Later, he would clean up, but now they were waiting for him.

Dodging a loaded freighter and stopping to let three riders pass, he walked across the dusty street to the Cattleman's Bank, slanting a contemptuous eye at the sheriff's office and jail next to it. He knocked sharply on the locked door.

Inside a chair scraped and a voice called, "Who's there?"

"Tarrant," he answered crisply and Presley Adams opened up, then quickly locked the door again.

Jim pushed back his pearl gray Stetson, his mouth grim. "Well," he said softly and a half dozen men sitting around a table outside the grilled counter all spoke at once.

He wheeled when a girl's voice said, "Since you're the bank president, Mr. Adams, why don't you be spokesman?"

Jim took off his Stetson. "Sorry, ma'am, I didn't see you. It's kinda dark after the sun."

CATTLEMEN

"Jim," Preseley said, "this is Stephanie Rogers, Rand's niece and she's here because he's laid up with a busted leg. She arrived just after you left for Wichita and she's representing the ranchers on the south rim."

"My pleasure," Jim said courteously. She was a slip of a girl to be representing the big cattle ranchers, but her uncle was the largest of them all and he apparently trusted her more than he did his neighbors. In one quick glance Jim saw she wore a flowered muslin dress and that she had a grave face and fine wide spaced eyes. He didn't bother to figure why those eyes should be so unfriendly toward him.

After he replaced his hat, he slowly built a cigarette and lit it. It wasn't until he'd inhaled deeply that he said, "Well, what's so all fired important that I had to come in from the ranch?" He knew, but he wanted to make it hard.

He looked at the men and the girl. Everyone was represented. The bank, the nesters, the tradesmen, the small ranchers, even a trail boss and—Stephanie Rogers.

"It's this way, Jim," Presley said and, now that his eyes were adjusted to the dimness in the bank, Jim could see that the banker's forehead was beaded with perspiration. "You turned in your star months ago and went to Wichita to see about buyers because you wanted to work and run cattle."

"Suppose we get to the point, Presley," Jim said quietly.

"We want you to take back the star." the older man blurted. "We got to have you."

THE MEN watched him almost as if they were holding their breath for his answer. Only the girl was utterly impassive. Jim laughed and it was both bitter and angry at the same time. But when he spoke his voice was low and controlled.

"I ought to tell all of you to go to hell—and I would if we didn't have a lady present." He sucked in a long drag of smoke and let it trickle out his nostrils. "Bannock Springs was a law-abiding clean town when I ran it. We had a rough, noisy crowd moving in and out like any trail railhead. We had saloons and gambling and dance halls. And you men," he motioned to Slim Gaven, the trail boss, "who drove your Texas leghorns here could be sure it *was* a law-abiding town. Then I turned in my star and what happened?" His contempt flayed them. "In a matter of weeks Bannock Springs became a sink hole of inquity; a rotten dump for card-sharps, killers and outlaws. You've turned this town into a place that's unsafe for its people and now you come whining back to me to undo what you and your weakling of a sheriff let happen." Jim's eyes bore into each of them. "I warned every one of you, except you, miss, that Hack was a passable deputy, but a man who had to follow orders, not give 'em. He's no damn good, pardon me, miss, as number one man. I told you, didn't I, Presley?"

"You told us," the rotund banker said unhappily.

"But you knew better than I," Jim went on, cutting his words at them. "Anyone can order Hack around." He saw Stephanie half rise from her chair in protest and ignored it. "Everything I say about Hack's been proven, or you wouldn't have hollered for me to come back. He's a joke and you all know it. The town's being run by somebody who can draw a gun fast. I'm not sure who the head man behind all this mess is—yet."

"We didn't listen to you, Jim, and we were wrong. Hack can't handle it." It wasn't easy for Presley. "Now we're asking you to pin back on the star and clean up."

"Isn't it a little late?" Jim asked, dropped his cigarette and ground his heel on it. "Hack won't take kindly to losing the sheriff job. You were the one who said he deserved to be promoted, Presley, you made a right flossy speech

about it. A man, even a weak man, has his pride."

"He'll step down," Presley said with finality. "He wants to. He don't like the spot he's in."

Jim's smile was bleak. "That could figure," he admitted. "But suppose he doesn't, what then?"

The girl spoke suddenly and Jim turned. Subdued violence was in her voice, which would have made him more than alert had it come from a man. "I suppose you won't have trouble cleaning up Bannock Springs, Mr. Tarrant?" Her eyes travelled the length of him and came to rest on his black handled guns. "You men," she said scornfully, "don't want a sheriff. You want a killer. It isn't as though Mr. Tarrant isn't known all over the Territory as a killer sheriff. I call you the Widow Maker, mister."

There was a stunned silence and the men looked at Jim with apprehension until he smiled. "I thank you, ma'am." He bowed slightly. "Widow Maker is a fine name. The notches on my gun aren't there because I've deprived pretty little fillies like you of law-abiding husbands." She flushed and his eyes held hers. There was simplicity and a directness in her as strong as the sun. There was a stubborness too.

"What about it, Jim?" Slim Gaven demanded.

"I SUPPOSE I decided I'd try to clean up Bannock Springs when I got word to come pronto," Jim said. "I'm ranching way the other side of this county, but I don't want this to be a sink hole." His glance flicked Stephanie's. "And if now I'm called a Widow Maker, I reckon I'm willing to add a few more to the score to make Bannock Springs decent again. I'm sorry my guns offend." He straightened his Stetson. "I'll take over Monday; someone had better tell Hack. If any of you want me I'll be at the hotel."

Stephanie got up from the table quickly. "Good-by," she said, and before one of the men could reach the front door, she'd unlocked it and stepped out on the planked walk.

"You don't want to tell Hack yourself, do you, Jim?" Presley asked hopefully.

"If you're all afraid you'll hurt his feelings," "I will," he answered shortly and the banker flushed as Jim walked out into the sun.

He went across to the *Mansion House* and didn't take long talking to Dad Dexter, the proprietor. He picked up his saddlebags and the key and went up the squeaking stairs. Inside the square room, he tossed his belt and guns on the bed, then pulled off his shirt. He poured water into the wash-bowl and soaped himself. It was good, getting rid of the dust and travel-stain.

He was buttoning his shirt when he went over to the window fronting the street. For a moment he stood staring down at the hot dusty town that had gone bad. Anger tightened through him that Hack had been so weak a man. He saw a woman get gingerly into a buckboard and caught the tension in her movements as she waited for her son to untie the team and get away from Bannock Springs.

Then he saw Stephanie Rogers come out of the mercantile and walk swiftly to the sheriff's office. He looked thoughtfully at the door which closed behind her.

It wasn't hard to figure her unfriendliness and her resentment if there was a romance brewing between her and Hack. Jim hoped there wasn't. Hack needed a strong hand, but it seemed a waste for this spirited girl to supply it. He was no match for Stephanie. Not that Jim personally gave a damn, but he didn't want her cluttering up the situation any more than it already was.

Hack wasn't going to take kindly to losing his star, no matter what Presley and the rest of them said. Like most weak good-looking men, Hack would feel the demotion pointed the finger of failure at him. Not only would he bit-

terly resent it, but it would fester inside until he blew up at the wrong time, trying to prove himself to be something he wasn't.

He sighed and turned from the window. There was a sharp crack and he dropped. The bullet thumped through the window at the level where his head had been and flattened itself in the opposite wall.

His eyes were icy when he got his gun, knowing it was too late. There was no question but what they were aware of why he'd come. This was just to let him know they knew. War was declared before he'd even started gunning, or pinned on the sheriff's badge. Well, he like it swift. He wasn't a man who liked delays, though he could have the patience of Job when circumstances demanded.

THE SUN was slanting down behind the ridge when he buckled on his belt and checked his guns. Then he walked down the stairs and across to the sheriff's office.

The two cells were empty at the back of the long room and Hack sat at one of the two desks, Stephanie across from him. Jim's entrance seemed to surprise them, though it shouldn't have. Hack got up and swaggered over, his hand outstretched.

"I'd better go," Stephanie said and her dark eyes flicked to Jim's guns for an instant.

"No," Hack said. "I hear you're taking back your old job, Jim."

"They sent for me, so it seems like," he said easily. Stephanie was prettier than he'd realized in the dimly lit bank.

"Some of the boys around town have heard about it and don't like it." Hack was worried. "You might find a peck of trouble, Jim."

He shrugged. "One of the sons already took a shot at me."

Stephanie's eyes darted to his guns again and he smiled bleakly. "No, not yet," he said. "I didn't see who did it."

Hack touched his own gun self-consciously. "No one's shot at me." He was almost belligerent about it.

"You're real lucky." Jim built a cigarette. "Who's running the town?"

"I'm not sure." Hack smoothed his blond hair. "Some say one, some another, you know how it is. Silk Owen won Reilly's saloon from him in a crooked card game; but no one can prove it. I mean, Jim, it's just talk. Reilly got pretty sore and shot off his mouth some before he pulled out."

Jim frowned and studied his cigarette. Silk Owen was known throughout the Territory for the crooked gambler he was. He was living today because he was a fast man with a gun. Without needing proof, he knew Silk was fleecing cowhands and anyone else who was sucker enough to walk into a card game.

"How long's Silk had Reilly's place?" Jim asked.

"A few weeks." Hack was off hand about it. "But you can't prove anything on Silk. There's been some rustling, but you can't tie that into him."

Stephanie spoke spiritedly. *"Some* rustling! They're stealing the south valley blind. We've put on extra riders, but we can't stop it." Her dark eyes blazed. "It's Bull Mullen's gang of outlaws. I've told you that, Hack, time and again."

"I know." He looked embarrassed when he turned to Jim. "I've tried to find their hideout. I questioned some of the boys they say belong to Mullen's crowd when they came in to Bannock Springs." He flung out his arms hopelessly. "But they behave themselves here, so how can I throw 'em in jail? I never saw Bull himself. Look, Jim, the boys swear they're only trying to find silver in the hills."

Jim snorted. "And you believe it's any kind of silver except what they can get from stolen beef?"

"But where's the proof?" Hank demanded angrily. "I suppose you'll clean up the town without it."

"Waiting to hear from Reilly." She "Oh, yes, he'll clean it up." Stephanie pushed back her chair. "He'll just kill anyone who gets in his way."

Hack looked worried. "You don't mean it quite that way, honey."

"She means it." Jim smiled. "You want me to ask politely if Silk and the rest of the bad boys will be good and ride out of town, ma'am?"

"There are ways to tame a wild town without guns," she informed him haughtily.

"Are there?" he asked and glanced pointedly at Hack.

Almost defiantly, Stephanie put her hand on Hack's arm. And, looking at her, Jim wondered if she realized her feeling for Hack was partially, at least the instinct of the strong to protect the weak?

Jim wondered, too, if her fierce opposition to guns deepened Hack's lack of aggression in meeting this crisis? Her uncle's opinions hadn't rubbed off on her yet. He was a real fire-eater. He believed guns must speak in order to drive out lust and violence and restore decency and law here in Bannock Springs. Still, in all fairness to her, Hack was a man to shut his eyes on trouble and leave his gun in its holster.

"I hope there's no hard feelings, Hack, because I'm going to pin on the star again," Jim said. "I'll be glad to have you as deputy if you want to stay on."

Hack blustered, his face red. "I'll have to think that over plenty. I got offers and you and I don't exactly see eye-to-eye."

That's sure," Jim said flatly. "Let me know in the morning. I'd better get some grub." He smiled briefly at Stephanie, who didn't respond, and then went out of the sheriff's office.

Hack must keep his pride if he could, but Jim was certain he knew what the answer would be in the morning. Hack would stay on until the going got too rough...

Chapter 2

TWILIGHT was thickening across the land, the purple of another night crept down from the ridge. Jim turned into the Trail's End Cafe. He stood for a moment smiling at Miss Bessie, who put her hands on her ample hips and stared back at him.

"Lands sakes, you came in the nick of time, didn't you?" She held out her hardened hand and when they shook she had the grip of a man. "It's got so them skunks may take a shot at me when I poke my nose out."

"I'll bet you're scared to death," he scoffed. Miss Bessie was one of his good friends and had been since he was sheriff. Middle aged, gray haired and not afraid of man or beast, that was Miss Bessie. Her husband had been killed in a trail stampede and she'd run Trail's End ever since. Some of the town might not like her bluntness, but they all called her *Miss* Bessie and admitted her food was the best in the whole Territory.

"Silk Owen's small potatoes," she said as if they'd been discussing him yesterday. "Just a crooked gambler who gives out enough free drinks so he can cheat and win from the drunks."

"How did he win from Reilly?" he asked.

"Reilly always ran a straight game and he didn't look for Silk to cheat him. It's been a real blow to me to have Reilly go, but he was too danged mad to stay. You might say he was like a son to me, never too busy to drop in and gab a little." She leaned on the counter and eyed Jim sternly. "That Silk's makin' a lot of noise to attract the attention while the real skulduggery's going on somewhere else."

"Kitty still here?"

shook her head. "The rustling's getting serious, Jim. The trail bosses are worried and Bannock Springs will be finished if they take their herds to another railhead. You just got to find Bull Mullen's hideout and rid this country of his mess of owlhooters." She poured him a cup of coffee. "We got to be decent and safe here. And some of the little ranchers will lose their spreads if you don't clean up Silk Owen's games. I'll get you a steak."

The crooks and outlaws had become bolder and bolder when they found the sheriff wouldn't lift his hand against them. If only the Citizens Committee headed by Presley Adams had listened to him when he'd told them Hack wouldn't be any good in the sheriff's job. There wasn't any use going over that again, he had to pick up from here.

Miss Bessie put a thick steak and hashed browns down in front of him and then butter and buscuits. Nothing had ever smelled so good.

"Eat while it's hot," she ordered and poured herself some coffee. "They tell you about Wells Fargo? They sent one of their men here to investigate the latest stage robbery that got a lot of their gold." She shook her head. "He ran into a dead end and couldn't find out a thing. There's some real big black thunderclouds menacing Bannock Springs, Jim."

He rolled a cigarette. This was worse than he'd thought. And Miss Bessie was never one to build a scare. "I'll look around," he said laconically. Finally he broke the silence. "What do you think of Stephanie Rogers, Rand's niece? We didn't exactly hit it off." He smiled wryly.

Miss Bessie raised a surprised eyebrow. "She's a real grand girl. Hack thinks so, all right." She smiled.

"She's filled with foolish ideas about a man using guns." He was surprised to find Stephanie had riled him this much.

"It don't do harm to be a little soft. It's becoming to a female." Miss Bessie slammed a dish or two. "Look at me. I'm a battle-ax because all the softness was took out of me when Josh up and got killed."

Jim left money for his meal on the counter, got up and put his arm around her. "You're an old fraud," he said gently. "You've got a heart as big as all outdoors." He noticed her eyes were suspiciously misty when he left.

JIM CROSSED to Reilly's old place that Silk had stolen from him with crooked cards. The hitching rail was filled and Jim pushed through the slatted doors. The long smoke filled room was noisy, someone was playing the tinny piano and a dance hall girl laughed shrilly. The bar was crowded with Circle O and Rand Rogers 9 X hands and the gambling tables were run by hard faces, expressionless men. Jim elbowed his way through the crowd toward the end of the bar and found Pete Reynolds, Rand's foreman, morosely drinking.

Pete smiled. "Welcome back to town, Sheriff," he said. He waited until the barkeep had filled Jim's shot glass before he continued. "Things sure have changed. You doing anything about it, Jim?" He tossed off his own drink.

"Maybe."

Pete nodded toward a door at the rear. "Our present sheriff's making a call."

The door opened and Hack came out followed by a thin man with a streak of silver through his hair. "Silk?" Jim asked quietly.

Pete said, "Yeah."

Hack nodded curtly to them, then slammed out of the saloon, the slatted doors swinging back and forth after him. Jim walked back to Silk Owen. The gambler watched him with cold unfathomable eyes, though he smiled.

"I heard you were back in town, Tarrant," he said. He held a deck of cards and was letting them drop in a long stream from one hand to the other.

"The Citizens Committee asked me to pin back on the sheriff's badge," Jim told him quietly. "I'm telling you in advance that Bannock Springs isn't big enough for both of us. Card games are going to be run straight in my town, without any professional gamblers dealing from the bottom of the deck. You're crooked as hell, Owen. The place you run is crooked and you got it crooked. Get out peacefully, or feet first, I don't give a damn which."

Silk Owen didn't change expression. He let the cards run from his left to right hand and back again. "Is that all you go to say?" he asked.

"It's enough." Jim turned on his heel and went toward the entrance of the saloon.

A pretty blonde girl was cutting across his path in the hazy smoked filled room. Jim's gray eyes narrowed in surprise that Kitty was still working here. It hadn't occurred to him that she would after Reilly lost the place and pulled out. She was Reilly's girl!

She spoke, not looking at Jim and scarcely moving her red lips. "See you at the hotel later." Then she called gayly to one of the cowhands at the bar.

As Jim continued on his way out Pete shouted and he waited until the foreman shoved through the crowd. "You coming to the valley soon?" he asked and when Jim nodded he seemed to let out his breath. "We got real bad trouble. We're going to get those rustlers, Jim, if we have to kill every last son of them. Get on that star and let's get goin!"

"Monday," Jim said.

Pete clapped him on the back. "Rand and the rest of us are sure glad you'll be back in business. Hack just looks like he's scared silly and talks real careful to Silk." He didn't bother to hide his disgust.

"He's not a gun fighter," Jim said.

"He's no fighter with anything. I'll tell Rand he'll be seeing you soon."

"Tell the other big ranchers too." Jim walked out into the night.

HE WENT without hurry, turning his back on the man who'd tried to kill him through the open window of his bedroom. And on any of Mullen's gang who might be in town and had to get him first. The street stretched before him with deep shadows at the mouth of the alley close to the hotel. If his tightening nerves were alert to the loud street noises, he gave no indication of it. His hands swung easily, ready for lightening draws of the two black handled guns slung low on his thighs. Soon, he knew, men would die in the thick dust of the street.

Inside the hotel he drew a glass of tepid water from the lobby jar, then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. Only then did Jim look around. He was surprised when he found Stephanie's dark eyes studying him from a horsehair chair near the counter.

"Howdee, ma'am," he said courteously. He strode over to her. "I told Pete to tell your uncle I'll be out to see him."

"I'm sure Pete will deliver your message, Mr. Tarrant."

Anger tightened through him at her disdain. "There's going to be trouble and you won't be able to hide from it," he told her brutally. "Bull Mullen's men shoot down women and dogs as well as men. You'd be safer here in town staying close to the hotel."

"I'll be safe," she flared. "And I don't need your advice, Mr. Tarrant."

"You'll be lucky if you don't need my guns before this thing is through." Their eyes met and fought and it was he who looked away when Kitty called his name and waved to Stephanie.

"Excuse me, ma'am," he said gravely and followed Kitty into the Ladies' Parlor. But not before he saw Stephanie's eyes widen in surprise. Well, he

was surprised himself that Kitty was friendly with the aloof Stephanie Rogers.

"Don't turn on the lights," Kitty said as he started to touch a match to the kerosene lamp. "I can't be seen talking to you, Jim."

"Am I as dangerous as that?" he asked.

"I think so, I don't know for sure." Her words surged out and he saw the naked fear lying in her eyes from the light in the lobby. "I don't think Reilly's left this country." She was breathing fast. "I've never seen the Irishman so outraged as when Silk cheated him out of his saloon. No matter what Miss Bessy says, I know Reilly wouldn't take it lying down. Please, Jim, if you find him, or hear anything about him let me know. I'm so afraid he'll either shoot it out with Silk, or ambush him."

Jim patted her shoulders. "I'll let you know," he promised. "And if you hear anything you let me know." He wouldn't blame Reilly if he planned revenge, but right now he couldn't have Reilly acting independently. The thing might explode before Jim was ready.

He got his second surprise that night when Stephanie called to Kitty and there was no mistaking her friendliness. They talked for a moment before Kitty ran out of the hotel.

Stephanie looked at Jim. "Kitty's a fine person, isn't she? So loyal and honest in her love for Reilly."

He blinked for a second and she turned and went up the stairs leaving him looking after her.

This was the last reaction he'd expected from a girl like Stephanie. She had an enormous tolerance and understanding of people, with hidebound convictions mixed in. Not that Kitty wasn't a fine girl....but some of the ranchers' families didn't see as clearly into Kitty's heart as Stephanie.

It was a shame she didn't have more understanding of a sheriff who had to use his guns to make the town safe. The Widow Maker she'd called him and he grimmaced. But he hadn't been only talking, she might need his guns if she found herself and her uncle in jeopardy. She might change her mind. She might even change it when it was too late. She was too soft for this harsh land and the Territory would break her, and her heart as well.

Jim unlocked his room and flung the door wide, standing aside, his guns in his hands. He waited, but there was no sound inside number 6. Thinking how foolish he'd feel if Stephanie had happened to open her own door and seen him, Jim went in and kicked the door shut. He propped a chair under the knob and in ten minutes he was asleep.

Chapter 3

SUNDAY morning before he went out for breakfast, Jim wrote a letter and waited for the stage to come in. Only a few early risers were waiting when it rolled in. Jim handed the burly driver the letter he'd written to Rocky Gilmore, his foreman.

Last night he'd decided he needed somebody here to side him and who wasn't known to Silk Owen. A man smart enough in a card game to know when he was being cheated, and who was fast with his gun, a man Jim could trust. He'd written about the setup here to Rocky and warned him not to recognize Jim when he reached Bannock Springs. Rocky was to get a room at the *Mansion House* and they'd meet in Jim's room late at night. Rocky was to use his own judgment and play it smart.

And he had plenty of savvy, Jim thought, as he went to Miss Bessie's cafe. They'd met at Wichita and from

the beginning Jim had liked the pleasant friendly man who knew cattle and the range.

When he'd returned to his ranch, Jim had a new ramrod.

In the cafe he found Hack and Miss Bessie talking and Hack frowned when he saw Jim.

"Ham and—like always?" Miss Bessie asked.

"The same." Jim smiled. "Morning, Hack."

"Morning," he answered. He kept his eyes on his plate and ate rapidly, washing it down with java. Jim waited patiently for him to talk.

Finally he moved his plate and looked at Jim. "What's your first move?"

"Silk Owen."

"You can't get him," Hack protested. "You can't prove he's crooked and you can't prove he's hooked up with Bull Mullen."

Jim slammed his fist down on the counter and the heavy plates jumped. "That's the trouble," he said very quietly. "Every thing's got to be *proved* before anyone makes a move." Hack's face got brick red at the implication. "You can't do this, you can't do that. Why?" Jim demanded. "Who says so? Do you think Silk's going to confess he runs a crooked game and works for Bull?"

"You can't go gunning for a man you only suspect," Hack objected vehemently.

"Who says so? You? Watch me." He caught the gleam of deep approval in Miss Bessie's eyes as she set down his breakfast. He buttered his biscuit lavishly and ate it before he glanced at Hack. "How well do you know Silk?"

"I've lost a little money at poker. I only played in the games he runs privately back in his office, so no one knows I've gambled," he hastened to explain. "I had to protect the good name of sheriff's office, didn't I?"

He reminded Jim of a puppy who'd acted foolish and still wanted a pat on the head. But this was stupid even for Hack. If the other card players didn't tell it on him, then Silk would be certain to see it got around. It would be a lot safer for Hack when he turned in his badge, if he quit the sheriff's office entirely.

Then Hack said with sincerity, "You can count on me, Jim. I'm not going to let you down. I decided to stick as deputy." He held out his hand and they shook. "I'm glad you're back," he confessed. He paid Miss Bessie for his food and just as he got to the door, Jim got an idea and called him back.

"I want the truth," he said quietly. "You owe Silk Owen any gambling debts?"

Hack's face was answer enough. "How much?" Jim demanded and reluctantly Hack told him. The amount was a little staggering for a man with only a sheriff's salary and Jim's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "First thing in the morning when the bank opens up, we'll take care of it." He stopped Hack's protest. "You can't arrest a man when you owe him gambling money," he told him mildly.

The bluster went out of Hack and he finally muttered, "Looks like I've been a fool."

"I guess," Jim agreed and watched him leave the cafe. Then he and Miss Bessie smiled ruefully at each other.

"There ain't a mite of harm in him, Jim," she said.

"I know. He's a good man with cattle, this is just the wrong job for him."

"Stephanie'll make a real man out of him," Miss Bessie prophsied.

"I guess," Jim said and went out into the hot sun.

BEFORE he rode out of town he stopped at the Wells Fargo office where Bob Butterfield was working and moaning about the stage robbery.

"Dangedest thing, Jim," he said bitterly. "Not a clue. The company's investigator was here and worked hard and came up with nothing." He rubbed his wrinkled forehead wearily and Jim thought that the thin little man might blow away in a good strong wind someday. "Seven masked men held up the stage as it came down the canyon road. Thy didn't hurt any of the folks, but they tied them up good. None of 'em talked, they just took all the guns and the Wells Fargo gold shipment."

Jim built a cigarette. "A smooth job," he commented.

"I'll say," Bob agreed. "Whoever planned it was a good organizer because this went off just like clock work. Jim, if you can find out anything, *anything* at all let us know. There's a nice reward."

"I'm not working for that. I'll let you know what I can find out." Jim got his roan from the livery and rode out of town.

Today he'd talk to the small ranchers and try to learn how many of them owed money to Silk and how many stood a chance of losing their ranches because of it.

For some reason Jim kept thinking about Stephanie and decided again it would be a waste if she married Hack. In the end she'd get tired of being the strength for him to lean on. He thought about her blue-black hair and the way the kerosene lamp in the hotel shone on it. He remembered the fire in her eyes and the stubborn tilt to her chin.

He loped along the hot dusty road, his eyes constantly alert for any suspicious movement in a clump of mesquite. A man's back made a good target for an ambusher.

Jim Tarrant had had a host of friends, but during the years they'd married and settled down, while he'd ridden on. Now, he knew he was tired of cleaning out the bad men and sick of living by his guns. He wanted the peace of his ranch. Then his big generous mouth thinned. It would be a lonely peace after he finished in Bannock Springs and hung up his guns. A man was always lonely without a woman. For the first time, he thought seriously about marriage. Jim's eyes were inscrutable as he searched the horizon. The girl he might want some day wouldn't want a man who'd been a killer—a Widow Maker, and who was going to kill again. Most nice girls would feel as repelled as Stephanie was. And he didn't want the other kind.

Most of the day Jim spent visiting the small ranchers close to town. He found that two of them owned Silk money and he'd taken a mortgage on their ranches for it, so they conceivably could lose everything they'd worked for. It made it rough on their wives and kids, so say nothing of the years of brutal work they'd put in. Presley Adams hadn't been interested in rescuing them, after delivering a lecture on their reckless stupidity.

Everyone was relieved that Jim was back and without exception they promised cooperation in any possible way. Each man vowed he'd be ready to ride for the rustlers when Jim gave the word, though none of them had lost any cattle. That wasn't unexpected because this rangeland was too close to Bannock Springs and Bull Mullen was confining his operations to the big spreads nearer the foothills. He had ready access there to hidden canyons where he could stash his stolen beef. Then, in the dead of night he could make delivery to wherever the steers were sold.

The day's ride proved Miss Bessie was right. Silk Owen was trying to build himself a big ranch by absorbing the small ones over his poker table. It woudn't do any good to tell these men they were fools, they'd only set their jaws and go on believing they could lick Silk at his own game when the Lady whose name is Luck smiled on them. Most men, Jim knew,

wouldn't admit even to themselves they'd been suckers enough to be cheated.

IT WAS getting on toward twilight when Jim turned the roan back to Bannock Springs. He followed the valley road beside the creek, alert to small alien sounds. But he wasn't expecting the first shot that split the air. The bullet fell short because on that split second he'd spurred his horse and the big roan had jumped.

Jim rode into a clump of willows, then the second bullet thumped into the ground. He flipped a revolver shot as he sprang out of the saddle. Crouching by the willows, he waited. Let the ambusher make the next move. All he wanted was for the man to break from cover long enough so he could identify him in the purple light.

Jim held one hand over his horse's nostrils to keep him from nickering and waited patiently. Funny, how much a man wanted a smoke when he knew he couldn't have it. He scarcely breathed as he listened for the slightest sound.

Beyond the creek a pebble rattled and Jim turned his head to watch the other side of the water. A bush crackled and he snapped three shots in rapid succession and knew one of them had struck its target by the soft grunt of pain. There was a scramble, then a horse streaked out for town.

Jim was in the saddle following slowly. It wouldn't be hard to locate the man in Bannock Springs. Let Bull and his crowd worry about who'd shot the outlaw, because at that distance in the dusk the ambusher couldn't be certain it had been Jim. At least, there'd be some question about it.

Back in town, Jim left his horse at the livery and went to wash up before he strode to Reilly's old place. Luck was with him because Kitty was standing outside and there was time to tell her about the man he'd shot and ask her to keep an eye peeled and let him know if she saw a man wearing a bandage.

He walked on down to supper and was eating pie and drinking coffee when a boy came in with a note and Miss Bessie handed it across the counter to Jim. It was from Kitty. One of Silk's men had come into the saloon wearing a sling. Jim lit a cigarette and burned up the note until it was only a black ash on his plate.

Then he said good night to Miss Bessie and found Hack in his room changing his shirt. Jim briefed him on the man who'd tried to ambush him. "You're sheriff until tomorrow, so I need you now," Jim said.

"I owe Silk money," Hack reminded him. "I wouldn't want any trouble with him tonight."

"I'll have the trouble, you'll look on."

The saloon was crowded when they pushed their way in and Jim led straight to Silk's office with Hack reluctantly following.

Without knocking Jim flung open the door and Silk looked up from his desk, a frown of annoyance creasing his forehead. It instantly disappeared when he recognized his visitors.

"This is an unexpected pleasure, gentlemen," Silk said smoothly. "What can I do for you?"

Jim turned to Hack who said belligerently, "Someone took a shot at Jim and he thinks he winged the skunk. Do you know about it?"

"What could I know?" Silk shrugged.

Exasperated, Jim wished he had on the sheriff's star, but he couldn't reach over and pluck it off Hack's shirt. "I hear one of your men is wearing his arm in a sling," he sad curtly.

Silk lit a cigar. "You hear strange things here in Bannock Springs."

Jim was tight inside and he wanted to knock that sneer off the gambler's

face. "I want to talk to that man—now," he said.

Silk turned the cigar slowly in his fingers. "It's too bad, but he's just left town. Seems his poor old mother took sick and he had to go to her, naturally." He caught the cold fury in Jim's eyes and added hastily, "His arm wasn't in a sling because a bullet grazed him, but because his horse stepped in a gopher hole and tossed him and he sprained his wrist."

"I'm right surprised, Silk," Jim said evenly. "I didn't know you hired weaklings. A man's pretty much of a sissy, isn't he, if he can't take a sprain?"

"Oh, but this man is," Silk agreed heartily.

"There's nothing we can do here, Jim," Hack said, "Let's be going."

JIM MOVED forward quickly and grabbed Silk's shirt, bunching and twisting it. "I don't play soft and easy like Hack." He yanked Silk to his feet."

"Don't get rough with me, friend." Silk's eyes were icy.

"You scare me." Jim slapped his face hard with his open hand and then sent in a driving right to Silk's jaw that dropped the gambler to the floor.

"Arrest him," Silk screamed to Hack.

"Shut up," Jim ordered. "That's a sample of what you'll get if you stay around here, or order another ambush. This is your last chance to get out with your skin." He pushed Hack in front of him out of the office and slammed the door.

"You oughtn't to have done that," Hack protested. "He's mad and he'll make trouble. He's liable to swear out a warrant for your arrest."

"Tell him to wait until tomorrow, that you won't work on Sunday." Jim managed not to smile, because Hack was nodding his agreement in complete seriousness. What a happy day it would be for outlaws if a Sheriff didn't do business on Sundays. "Or it might be best if you got lost yourself until tomorrow," Jim told him.

"But Stephanie's still in town," Hack protested.

"Stay out of the saloon and you'll be all right." He wished Rocky were here, but his foreman still had hours of hard riding. "You go along," Jim said. "I'll be at the hotel."

"That's where I'm meeting Stephanie."

When they went in they found her and Presley in the lobby and Jim looked at Stephanie for a long moment. She was beautiful in a white frothy dress with puffed sleeves and red velvet sash and a small red bow on her gleaming black hair. He bowed courteously to her and she half-smiled.

"Glad to see you, Jim," Presley said importantly. "I'm anxious to know your plans."

"I'll leave Hack here tomorrow after I'm sworn in and I'll ride out to the south valley looking for rustlers," he told the bank president. Presley was a sanctimonious man, he thought. Jim's dealings with him had been few, they'd clashed about Hack's appointment as sheriff, but that had been their only real disagreement. Of course Jim had never tried to borrow money from the bank...

Presley turned to Stephanie. "It would be safer for you if Jim rides out to the ranch with you in the morning. And it will be company for you." He smiled as if pleased with his arrangements.

Jim was amused, because he had a hunch the last person she wanted to keep her company was him. He was right. She said, "I'm leaving so early I don't think Mr. Tarrant would find it convenient." She was stiff about it. "I'll stop by Baxters for an early lunch." Finally she looked at Jim.

"Anyway, I'm not riding, I'm driving the team and buckboard."

Because he knew how much she didn't want him, Jim said, "You can't be too early for me, ma'am. I'll be glad to drive you." He enjoyed the angry color that brushed her cheeks.

"I'm glad you're getting an early start, honey," Hack said. "Somebody shot at Jim out in the valley and Jim had trouble with Silk about it. I don't want you around, Stephanie, if Silk follows Jim and they start shooting it out." Presley insisted on hearing about it all and Hack told him with relish. "Silk's not going to take that punch," he declared. "He and his men will be gunning for Jim."

This was his fault, Jim supposed, because he hadn't thought to tell Hack to keep his mouth shut about the run-in with Silk. Stephanie's eyes met Jim's and he saw the bright scorn in them.

"You didn't have to hit him," she said coldly. "You should be arrested."

"Thank you kindly." Jim turned to Presley. "Now, then," he changed the subject, "what about that Wells Fargo stick up?"

"I don't know much," Presley admitted. "That day when the stage was held up I was miserable with a toothache and at home. I only know what Bob Butterfield, their agent, said about it."

"The Wells Fargo detective who arrived and made his investigation, Mr. Tennant, did it without having to slap men around or kill them," Stephanie informed him.

"And he didn't find out anything," Jim replied flatly. This girl irritated him being so righteous and smug. She and Presley, he thought disgustedly, would make a good couple and it was a shame Presley was a confirmed bachelor. Together they could spend their nights in their rocking chairs uttering pretty speeches. He left them abruptly.

Chapter 4

IT WAS almost false dawn when Jim stirred. Someone was treading heavily up the stairs and down the corridor, whistling lightly. A door closed down the hall and Jim was instantly wide awake. It was Rocky announcing his arrival.

Ten minutes later there was a cautious knock on his door and Jim felt part of the load lift when he saw Rocky's bright, shrewd eyes and easy smile. Nothing bothered him. Like Jim, in a gun fight he never counted the odds against him and went in with his guns blazing. Rocky's code was a man could only die once and he might as well pick up fun along the way.

They whispered, because of the thin walls and the possibility that Silk wouldn't miss having a spy close at hand. Rocky was sure he could get the goods on Silk so Jim might as well ride down to the south valley and find the rustlers. It was typical of him that he didn't doubt Jim's ability to do it, any more than Jim did himself. So it was arranged. Jim would swear Rocky in as special deputy on the quiet, up here in his room before he rode south Until Rocky's hand was forced, he was to act as if he and Jim were strangers.

It was still early when Presley Adams and a few of the Bannock Springs' merchants stood in the office with Hack while Judge Simpson swore Jim in as sheriff. It was quick and simple. It took even less time for Jim to make Hack his deputy.

When the others left to open their stores for the day's business and Presley and the Judge had walked next door to the bank, Hack moved all his stuff out of the big desk, humming as he worked. With the responsibility

lifted, Hack seemed younger and at peace with himself.

For a moment Jim looked at the star pinned on the pocket of his blue shirt and let the hard anger boil him. He'd done the job once, then a pleasant, weak man had let the riff-raff pour into Bannock Springs. He'd let Bull Mullen hole up in some robbers roost from where he operated his rustling and holdups. Sooner or later Bull would become bolder and Presley's bank would be robbed. There'd be killings in the dusty street.

"Stay here a minute," he told Hack and strode out of the office and went next door.

Presley was curious about the withdrawal, but when Jim volunteered no information he stopped his questioning, although that didn't stop the speculation glint in his eyes.

"Guess you must have seen some cattle you fancied buying," Presley proclaimed and since Jim didn't refute it, he seemed satisfied enough.

Back in the office, Jim dropped the small sack of gold on the desk. "This clears you with Silk," he said shortly.

"Thanks." Hack breathed easier. "I'll pay you back, Sheriff, out of my salary."

"Sure," Jim agreed. He looked at Hack thoughtfully and came to an abrupt decision. Suppose I take it to Silk myself and get a receipt?"

Hack looked embarrassed and angry, but he made no objection. There wasn't any doubt that Silk would make snide remarks to him about Jim's being his nursemaid, but Silk wouldn't be able to persuade him into another crooked game with this gold.

When Jim went in the saloon he saw Rocky already hobnobbing with Kitty at the bar. They glanced at him without interest and looked away.

Jim nodded to the bartender and strode back to Silk's office. He knocked and flung open the door. 'I brought the money Hack owes you," he said shortly.

Silk didn't change expression as he watched Jim from behind his desk. "You got nerve coming here after you socked me." He touched his bruised jaw. "I suppose you think that sheriff's badge gives you license to hunt down innocent men. The whole Territory knows you for a killer." He started to open a drawer and saw Jim's hands flash toward his guns. "I was only getting Hack's IOU'S," he complained and tossed a small stack of paper tied with string across the desk.

Jim thumbed through them and they tallied with the amount of gold he'd brought. "Count it," he ordered, sliding the sack toward the gambler.

Silk shrugged. "I'll take your word it's here."

AS JIM wheeled to leave a man came in, his right arm in a sling. Jim grabbed him. "How's your sick mother?" he asked too quietly. He shoved him, angry that he couldn't hit an injured man. Then he saw the glint of steel almost hidden in the sling.

There was a blur of motion and Jim's two guns were in his hands and a bullet in the man's arm, shattering it. The sherff's eyes were cold gray slate as he held one gun on Silk and the other on his henchman, who howled with pain. The gun dropped out of the sling.

Silk swooped it up. "Drop it," Jim said and he obeyed, hate glinting out of his eyes.

"You're fast," Silk admitted harshly. "Faster than I ever saw."

Jim picked up the gun and shoved it in his pocket, then he prodded the injured man. "Move," he said and followed him out. At the door he turned to Silk. "I didn't shoot to kill just now. Next time I will." He kept his gun on the man in front of him.

Rocky and Kitty looked mildly interested when Jim went through the

saloon with his prisoner and he heard the bartender suck in his breath sharply.

Outside Jim said, "What's your name?"

"Red," he muttered. "My Lord aren't you going to get me to a doctor?"

Jim didn't answer until they were in the sheriff's office. Funny, he hadn't realized it was his own again. He looked at Hack, who blinked in stunned surprise, and said, "Lock him in a cell and get the doc."

Jim left and stopped to look in the open door of the saloon for a second, then went on to the *Mansion House*. It wasn't long before he heard Rocky's heavy tread and whistle. A door slammed down the hall and Jim smiled. Rocky always played it realistically. When he came, he would have changed his shirt, just in case someone was watching.

Jim's door opened silently and Rocky stuck in his beaming face, then as softly closed the door. "That jasper you shot and tossed in jail is Silk's right hand man," he spoke so softly no one listening in the next room could hear. "The bartender was scared plumb dumb at what Silk would do."

"He'll do nothing until he gets word from Bull Mullen, if my guess is right," Jim said flatly. "I'm swearing you in as special deputy."

After Rocky took the oath he said cheerfully, "I'll try to have Silk Owen in jail by the time you get back." He grinned. "Say, a real pretty gal pulled out with a team and buckboard at dawn. I was kinda wondering if she's your reason for hurrying along out there?"

"Hell, no!" Jim said and reloaded the gun he'd used, then slipped it back into its holster. "You follow me out of the hotel in about fifteen minutes. And keep your eye on Kitty just in case Silk decides she's slipping me information. I don't want her hurt."

"She won't be. I'll handle it here," Rocky assured him and rolled a cigarette.

Jim got his roan and settled down for a long trot, knowing a good horse like this one could trot steadily, covering fifty or sixty miles and not be too tired to repeat the next day. But it was a jolting pace and a tiring one for a rider.

BY THE time the sun was overhead, he had passed the Baxter ranch and didn't stop to see if Stephanie's buckboard was in the side yard. He judged she was, since it was time for an early dinner, and knew he couldn't care less.

At the fork in the wagon road, Jim took the narrower one along the creek because of the shade it would afford when he stopped to water the roan at a copse of willows and eat his own cold dinner. After he smoked a cigarette he went on toward the high ridge looming in the distance, which held deep canyons, anyone of which could hide rustlers and stolen herds.

An hour's ride brought him to the main road that cut through the good grazeland. The gamma grass was thick and the longhorns looked fat. At a rise Jim looked back and it was then he saw the buckboard and its ball of dust.

He pulled off the road and waited. It had to be Stephanie and he'd ride behind her on the chance she might have trouble of some sort, or someone might stop her. No one would, since this was open country, but he'd feel more comfortable if he rode rear guard. He'd do as much for any girl, even one whom he disliked.

She slowed in surprise when she recognized him and he noticed that the team was skitterish. She nodded coolly and went past him too fast for the uneven bumpy road.

He waited until her dust settled before he followed. As he rode he

found he was churning inside with resentment because she hadn't had the simple courtesy to stop and ask if he wished to ride with her. But for all he knew she might have taken Hack's warning that Jim was a target for an outlaw bullet. She could be steering clear of him because she believed he and his guns drew trouble. But he reasoned if anyone wanted to shoot it out with him it wouldn't be while he was driving a 9X team with Stephanie Rogers beside him.

She didn't belong in the Territory and Rand ought to send his niece back where she came from. Somewhere in the east very likely, where gentlemen carried derringers in their sleeves.

The brassy blue sky was beginning to cloud up, but at the rate she was travelling she'd be at her home-spread before dark. Jim looked off toward the ridge that was coming closer. The creases of the canyons showed dark along the face of the cliffs. Somewhere up there Bull Mullen and his crowd laughed at their success. Somewhere they were safely hidden, ready to swoop down on the herds and stages and Jim's anger knotted.

It was certain Bull Mullen had a keen knowledge of this land and there could be no argument about the man's nerve and cleverness. If he weren't stopped soon Bannock Springs would be a ghost town because the trail bosses would take their herds to a safe railhead.

This fight would be between Bull and him, and Jim was glad he'd pinned back on the star. He hoped word had been passed and Bull knew he was gunning for him. That he and his gang had waited to invade Bannock Springs until Jim turned in his star was evidence enough of their respect for his guns.

The sun passed under a bank of clouds and there was relief from the intense heat. Jim touched his spurs to the roan's flanks and the big horse broke into a fast gallop which began to close the gap between them and Stephanie's buckboard. Jim turned things over in his mind and decided there wasn't any real connection between Silk's small operation in town and the rustling and stage robberies.

True, Silk could work for Bull, but the two lines seemed separate. Yet, it didn't make much sense to him that a crooked gambler like Silk would want to settle down here with a big spread where he'd be hated and distrusted.

THE buckboard was closer now and Jim decided he wanted to talk to Stephanie and urged his horse on. She must have heard him, because he saw her use the whip to send her team into a faster gallop. The lines around his mouth deepened a little as he pulled up. No slip of a girl had to make it any clearer she disliked him like sin. At the first chance he'd cut across the prairie and ride ahead of her. Stephanie could take care of herself.

The thunderclouds were piling up fast now in the west, becoming black and menacing. There was a flash of lightening and he decided he had to be gentleman enough to help Stephanie cover her wagon load of supplies. The was beautiful in a white frothy dress roan was travelling fast when there was a terrific clap of thunder and he saw Stephanie's skitterish team bolt. They were running away when he took off after her, the rain whipping his face.

As he raced past the wagon to reach the runaways, he saw that she hadn't lost her nerve. She was sawing the reins in a desperate effort to stop the horses, her face set in grim determination. Jim had to admire her, even reluctantly.

He caught the bridle of the near horse and gradually pulled them to a stop. Before he could swing out of the saddle, she was trying to put canvas over the groceries. Lightning

zigzagged across the sky and the rain beat down. After Jim had everything in place, he tied his horse on the back of the wagon and noticed Stephanie had moved on the seat, indicating she wanted him to drive.

"Thank you," she said. "I haven't had much experience with horses."

"Glad I was handy," he replied politely. The rain was soaking her, but she made no complaint. There were things about Stephanie a man had to like.

Then the storm stopped as quickly as it began and the sun spilled out of the sky with additional intensity. She smiled. "Now we can dry out," she said.

After that, silence lay heavily between them until just before Jim turned the team into the big side yard of the sprawling ranch house. Then she turned to him.

"I wish you hadn't made Hack a deputy. You must realize he isn't a gun fighter."

Jim smiled. "I guess we all know that."

"Yet, you're deliberately trying to pull him down to your level." Her dark eyes flashed. "Oh, why can't you leave him alone?"

Jim pulled the team up by the corral and looked at her gravely. "You can't make a man soft like a girl. You can't trade on his weaknesses to get your own way. Unless you want to make him end up hating you," he said.

"You're everything I despise," she told him fiercely. "You're hard and cruel—a killer."

"The Widow Maker, ma'am," he reminded her and his own voice was icy.

Without answering she sprang out of the wagon and ran to the house. Two of the hands came out of the bunkhouse to unload the buckboard and Jim unsaddled and turned his horse into the corral. He stood by the fence and looked out over Rand Rogers' vast ranch. The land stretched to the high rise of hills and made a very convenient spread for the rustlers. It would take many extra riders to hope to patrol the grazing herds.

HE HEARD Rand before he saw him and smiled. Never a quiet man, he was roaring now as he hobbled out with a makeshift crutch to welcome Jim.

"Come in here, Sheriff," he boomed. "You can't expect a man with a busted leg to go chasing you." His eyes twinkled when Jim met him on the veranda and his clasp was powerful. A big man, he looked a little shrunken now, probably due to his leg and the worry about the rustling.

"Glad to see you, Rand," Jim told him and meant it.

"Now you're back in harness maybe we can clean up this mess. Come in, come in." Rand thumped into the house and he chuckled at Jim's obvious surprise. "Wouldn't know the old place, would you?"

"No," Jim agreed. The former drab bachelor quarters were changed with gay curtains and covers over the old chairs. The furniture shone and there were flowers everywhere.

Rand yelled for whiskey and when Joe, the cook, came in with a tray he smiled broadly at Jim. "Howdy, Sheriff," he said warmly. "We're sure glad to have you back. Yes sir."

"Thanks," Jim said and was pleased these men liked him.

Rand sat with his leg up on another chair and poured out the liquor lavishly. They started talking about the rustlers, Rand cursing because he couldn't strap on his own guns and help Jim clean out the dirty pests.

He crashed his crutch on the floor. "I want to get Bull Mullen myself," he roared. "Hell, it's my cows he's thievin'."

Before Jim could answer, Stephanie ran into the big room. She'd changed

to a yellow dress and her shining black hair was smooth again. A man would be blind who didn't have his heart thump at her prettiness.

"Jim, you're upsetting my uncle and I won't have it," she stated firmly.

"Oh, pshaw, now you're talkin' foolish," Rand bellowed good naturedly. "Sit down and listen to important talk." She flushed but obeyed, ignoring Jim. "Pete, my foreman," her uncle went on, "is a good man and you can have him and any riders you need. Tell us what you want, Jim, and it's yours. I'm backing your play to the hilt. Stay here, make it your headquarters." There was pleading in his voice.

Stephanie looked down at her hands folded primly in her lap and Jim saw her slim body stiffen. She hated the idea of having him here and he unconsciously sighed.

"Thanks, Rand," he said quietly. "I'm riding out to the south herd tonight because I'm hoping the rustlers will show. I don't think it likely, but Bull Mullen might want to let his boys show his contempt for me. I'm damn sure, excuse me, Ma'am, Bull knows I'm sheriff again and he can't let his men think he fears me. He could make a token raid tonight in defiance."

"The ridge has eyes," Rand said slowly. "Bull knows you're here right now discussing him. Just as we know he's deciding whether he wants to make a grandstand play tonight."

"It's only a hunch," Jim admitted. "But it's worth my scouting around."

Joe put a platter of meat down on the long table at one end of the room and Stephanie got up. "Supper's ready, Uncle Rand," she said coolly.

Even the food was more palatable, Jim noticed, and Joe didn't sling the dishes any more. A man living in his house without a woman had a lonely life.

PETE REYNOLDS came in through the kitchen and for that one instant when he looked at Stephanie, Jim saw all the love in his heart shining through. It came as a shock that the foreman loved her. Well, she'd do better with him than she ever would with Hack.

Pete discussed the raids. "We do all we can, Jim," he said, "but these outlaws are like ghost riders who strike and strike where we aren't. Look, when we split it up and try to patrol both the big north and south herds, that night they run off with a small bunch we thought would be safe enough." His eyes were hard. "I tell you they act spooky."

"I'm riding with you tonight," Jim told him and caught the relief in Pete's face. "Sooner or later Bull Mullen has to make a mistake and we've got to be ready when he does." He ate for a while and wiped his mouth. "I aim to find their hideout."

Only Stephanie looked skeptical. When her eyes happened to meet Jim's, he saw the cold disdain and felt the red splash his lean face. Without saying one damn word she could rile him.

Rand had noticed her attitude toward him because he made no protest when she excused herself after supper. After Pete went to round up the men for night guard, Rand looked thoughtful.

Finally he asked bluntly, "What's wrong between you and Stephanie?"

"She doesn't like gunmen," Jim told him. It made no real difference to him. Only it was stupid and unreasoning of her and that annoyed him.

Surprisingly, Rand was silently laughing, his chins quivering. "She may not like gunmen," he finally said, "but she's one of the best shots west of the Mississippi."

Jim almost choked on his drink. "She's what?" he sputtered.

"That's right. Her father was a lawman in St. Louis and the Lord knows why, but my brother taught her to shoot." He took a noisy sip from his

glass. "Could be she hates guns because her pa was killed by a river boat gambler 'bout a year ago."

"That was a bad break," Jim said gently. He wondered if Stephanie had named her father a Widow Maker too? Or if she'd learned to hate guns because of his death?

Rand's shrewd eyes studied him. "You think Stephanie's real serious about Hack?" He was anxious, the way a fighter would always feel about a weaker man who backed down from trouble.

Jim got up and stretched his arms. "I wouldn't know," he said. "I better saddle up. Want me to help you to your room?" Rand grunted his yes and Jim settled him comfortable for the night. "Don't worry too much," he told Rand. "We'll round up this gang."

"Just be sure they don't get *you*," Rand answered.

Chapter 5

STEPHANIE didn't seem to be around when Jim went out the side door, heading for the bunkhouse and Pete. He was startled when she spoke from the dark of the veranda.

"I'm sure you're have good hunting, Mr. Tarrant," she said and her scorn bit at him.

He turned and walked to where she was standing. "Your father must have killed a few men, ma'am," he said quietly. "You must have understood that."

"Don't you mention my father!" she blazed and he caught her wrist before she could slap him.

She was trembling with fury and the fire in her made her move beautiful. Her flesh was soft and warm under his hand and suddenly his own anger exploded. He caught her up roughly in his arms and kissed her. It was a hard, bruising kiss that lasted until sanity returned to him and he released her.

She was white when she moved back from him. "If I had a gun I'd kill you or that," her words whiplashed him.

He felt a drumming roll in his chest. "You'd kill in anger, Stephanie, and think it right," he said, his words somehow came out gruffly. "When I kill to save the town from scum, you call me a merciless Widow Maker. Why don't you get sense, Stephanie?" he asked. "Why don't you face facts?"

Before she could answer he walked to the corral and had saddled up just as Pete and the riders poured out of the bunkhouse.

The moon was bright when they rode out of the yard and swerved across the prairie toward the ridge. Jim and Pete rode together silently and Jim cursed himself for having kissed Stephanie. It had been wrong of him. No man should kiss a girl in anger, wanting to hurt her.

Out of the silence Pete spoke almost shyly, "Stephanie's real beautiful, isn't she?"

"Real beautiful," Jim repeated sincerely. She ought to love Pete Reynolds. He was reliable, conscientious and his love would be deep and lasting. But from what Jim had seen, she seemed considerably more interested in Hack. Then he forced Stephanie out of his thoughts.

They reached the first night guard and pulled up. The herd was quiet, he reported, and he'd seen no suspicious shadows. Pete told him to keep a sharp watch and they rode on toward the outer edge of the south herd and its thousands of longhorns.

The high hills looked ominous beyond, as they veered to the right and started an easy climb. Finally Pete gave the whippoorwill's call and it was sweet and clear in the night. A little farther on they reached the line camp and found the hands waiting.

Everything was quiet here. It was too early, Jim knew, for trouble. "I'm

going up a little higher," he told Pete. "And you stay on guard with the cattle." He wheeled the big horse and started toward the hills.

Finally they hit the trail, which became steeper as it twisted around the boulders and scrub. Jim found a rock that commanded a fine view of the moonlit grazeland. After he tied his horse, he sat on the rock looking down at the valley. It would be a long patient wait, so he relaxed and wished he had a smoke. Hour after hour dragged on and still there was no sign of Bull Mullen and his outlaws. He didn't expect them to come this way, but he hoped they'd descend by a route he'd be able to spot, once they rode into the valley.

Nothing happened. Rand's 9X riders made their rounds of the herd and time kept dragging. It was about three, just before the change of shifts, that four men emerged from the deep black shadows of the hills.

Jim sat motionless. He waited until they'd fanned out and were riding toward the herd before he fired three shots in the air to warn the 9X men.

He forked his horse and sent him down and across to where the riders had suddenly appeared, hoping they'd return to their hideout by this same route. This might be the break he needed and his face was hard.

GUNS FLASHED and galloping hooves cut the silence. In the moonlight Jim saw one of the outlaw's fall out of his saddle, then another toppled into the swirling dust. One of the rustlers outdistanced a cowhand, whose shot missed. Jim lost him when the moon slid under a cloud. Then he stiffened and rubbed his hand over his eyes before he stared after the rider who'd disappeared. There was something teasingly familiar about the way he'd sat his horse, uneven with the weight just a little to the left side. It kept nagging him until the fourth rustler plunged up the grade toward Jim.

Gun in hand, Jim waited. He didn't want to kill the coyote, he wanted him alive to talk. The masked rider had almost drawn even with him when Jim shouted, "Drop your gun! You're covered."

The outlaws' snap shot whammed against a tree just to Jim's left, then bounced back, grazing his shoulder. His own gun spoke as the man's horse reared and the bullet caught the rustler in the chest. He was dead before he hit the ground.

Jim took the outlaws' gun, then dragged the body into the brush, cursing softly, because a horse had reared at the wrong second. Still, there was one less gunmen roaming the hills.

Jim rode down to the line camp, alert for any sign of Bull Mullen and other riders. Pete spoke his name softly as Jim swung out of the saddle. Fortunately none of the 9X men had been hurt. They'd brought in the two dead outlaws, but no one could identify them.

"Wait a minute," Pete said and stared down at one of the men in the wavering light from the fire. "I've seen this jasper once or twice at Silk's."

"Gambling?" Jim asked.

Pete frowned trying to recall. "I'm not sure."

Jim nodded, this dead man could have been one of the ones Hack said was peaceful and he had no grounds to arrest. Jim's face might have been cut from granite as he thought about Hack letting these rotten killers into Bannock Springs.

This hadn't been any real raid. Bull Mullen had sent a few of his boys down to flaunt his defiance of Jim Tarrant, Sheriff. That he'd lost three wouldn't matter.

The 9X men were gleeful, confident Bull wouldn't make another raid for a while. But Jim wasn't. This was exactly the reaction Bull wanted the crew to have so they'd be careless and

not on guard. Just before false dawn would be the time for Bull's raiders to swoop down to steal and kill.

While they ate around the fire, Jim warned them and it had a sobering effect. "I can be dead wrong," he admitted frankly. "But it can't hurt us to be on the alert."

Pete agreed and told him he was going back to the ranch to report to Rand. After Jim stationed lookouts where he wanted them, he picked his way back to the spot where Bull's riders had appeared and marked it by the two trees, one straight, the other gnarled. When dawn broke he'd try to track the rustler who'd escaped.

That teasing familiarity about the outlaw kept nagging at him. Suddenly he almost whooped. He'd remembered!

Reilly! It was the Reilly rode, with the same hunch of shoulder and a little more weight in the left stirrup.

SUPPOSE Kitty had been right and the hot headed Irishman hadn't left the Territory, but had somehow managed to join up with Bull Mullen and his outlaws? Reilly could have some wild plan whereby joining would help avenge himself on Silk. It was as dangerous as walking straight into an ambush because Bull would be suspicious of his every move. But if the phantom rider had been the Irishman, he'd succeeded in convincing Bull he didn't suspect the connection between Silk and the outlaw. And there might not be one. How the fighting Reilly figured joining Bull could serve his purpose was beyond Jim.

The thought that it might be Reilly was pleasant. It could be vitally important for Jim to have a friend in the robbers roost. He had a hunch he'd need one badly, if he cut the outlaws' trail. Then he decided to ride to the 9X home ranch before hunting for Reilly, if it were he. Rand and Pete ought to know he planned to ride deep into the ridge so that if he didn't get out alive, they could pick up his trail. He'd leave as many signs as he could to guide them up into the hidden canyons.

Dawn broke in scarlet glory as he turned into Rand's yard. He found himself thinking of Stephanie and the apology he owed her for that kiss last night. He was a courteous man and he had to make it right.

Pete slammed out of the kitchen door when Jim rode in. He smiled as he waited for Jim to slap some of the dust out of his trousers and shirt and wash at the pump.

Rand and Stephanie were eating breakfast at the long table and Jim stopped short when he saw Hack there. Under Jim's cold eye the deputy looked embarrassed.

"I came out to tell you the fellow you shot, that Red, escaped." Hack looked at Stephanie and swallowed hard. "He had an extra gun in his boot and started shooting. First he shot off the cell lock and he would have killed me if I hadn't ducked behind the desk." He raised his arms hopelessly. "What could I do, Jim?"

For a minute Jim didn't trust his voice, but when he spoke his voice was level. "Nothing," he said.

"That's not the only reason I came." Hack's words stumbled over each other in his eagerness to prove his competency. "A shipment of gold is coming by the next stage and I thought you ought to know. There's a stranger hanging around Bannock Springs. He claims he's a peaceable man going on west." Hack's eyes clouded in thought. "I'm real sure the fellow's a killer. He looks like it. Last night he won over five hundred from one of Silk's dealers. He was jumped going back to the hotel and killed the man who tried to rob him."

"What did you do about it?" Jim asked quietly.

"Why, nothing." Hack looked hurt at the question. "Kitty was a witness and swore the stranger killed in self-

defense. He's got a nice smile, but it didn't fool me."

It wasn't easy to keep a straight face, but Jim managed it. Rocky was doing all right in Bannock Springs. For the first time Jim looked straight at Stephanie as he sat down at the table. "Morning, ma'am," he said.

"Good morning, Sheriff," she answered and her voice was without expression.

WHILE HE ate flapjacks Jim reported everything he'd seen last night to Rand. The only thing he didn't tell was his idea that Reilly might have joined the outlaws.

When Joe brought more coffee Jim asked him if he'd pack some grub in his saddlebags. Then he told Rand and Pete, "I'll try to mark my trail when I get into the ridge. If I'm not back in two days come looking." His smile was bleak.

Rand cursed loudly and expertly that he couldn't ride with Jim. No man had a better right to kill the skunks than he, since it was mostly his cattle they were stealing.

After Jim picked up his saddlebags from Joe, he turned to Hack. "You better get back to Bannock Springs and stay around there," he said.

"I'm not keeping him from his duties," Stephanie cried angrily. "I had nothing to do with his coming here."

"Did I say you had?" Jim asked. As he was leaving he had a second with her alone. "I'm sorry about that, that kiss, ma'am," he told her softly, but she only tossed her head and turned away. He sure liked that yellow ribbon in her black hair.

Jim rode back to the area where the rider had disappeared into the hills, the man who rode like Reilly. After two hours he cut what he thought might be the trail. This wasn't the time to try to find Rand's last bunch of stolen cattle and, anyway, Jim was sure if he found Bull's headquarters he'd find the small herd, and maybe many others.

He felt the pressure and necessity for haste. Bull and his robbers roost must be located fast and wiped out before the stage was due. Otherwise, they might be successful in their holdup and Wells Fargo would lose more gold!

JIM WONDERED about Silk as he rode in the hot sun. He still didn't believe Bull was running Silk's operation. But right now his job was to make the valley safe for the ranchers and the canyon rode safe for the stage.

At noon Jim stopped and rested in the deep trees, protected in the rear by an outcropping. He munched on bread and cold beef, then rolled a cigarette.

He rode on slowly, his eyes searching for some hidden valley entrance, or some waterfall behind which an opening might lead to Bull's roost, methodically leaving bits of his handkerchief on bushes and rocks. The only water that constantly flowed into the valley creek was a bubbling spring for which the town was named. All the time he'd been sheriff Jim had never investigated the springs and now seemed as good a time as any. It was worth a chance. Furthermore, if he were bold about his search he might draw out an outpost guard, then if he lived, he would have some idea of the vicinity of the hideaway.

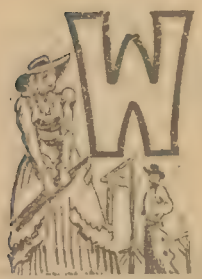
Purple shadows deepened in the ridge before Jim reached the springs. No bullet whizzed by him, or knocked him from his horse. He pulled up at a clearing by the springs and excitement built in him. But he found no opening behind the waterfall.

After watering and feeding the roan, he ate his own cold supper. He went over his plans and found himself thinking again about Stephanie. He'd never met a woman who stayed so consistently in his mind, or one quite as pretty. He liked the fire in her and

the honesty. She despised him and let him know it, simply and clean-cut. If she ever loved a man stronger than herself, that man would be the lucky one.

Crazy thoughts for a man she hated and Jim lay down with his hands folded behind his head. The tiredness oozed out of his body and it wasn't long before he slept.

- 6 -



WITH THE first gray light, Jim was riding through the trees. He tracked and back-tracked, covering any land formation that could possibly hide a band of men. It was weary work, but Jim scarcely noticed, he was so intent on finding Bull Mullen's roost.

The sun had reached its zenith when he cut onto a narrow rocky trail and was as eager as an old war horse as his eyes searched the ground. A spot of color just off the trail caught his eye. He slowed, there were no yellow flowers up here in the ridge. Suddenly he pulled up sharply. It was the small bow of yellow ribbon Stephanie had worn yesterday morning!

Bull Mullen had her. Jim's stomach knotted with fear for her that somehow the outlaw had inveigled her into the ridge. A terribly blinding anger mixed with Jim's fear. He forgot his plans, his job, everything in the driving urgency to save Stephanie.

He followed the trail as it wound higher and higher until it came out on a flat bench which cut into the cliff. He could see the whole valley below. There were grazing cattle and Rand's riders riding guard.

Carefully, Jim made himself build a cigarette. All his life he'd kept cool under fire and that had always meant an added advantage. Now, he was letting his worry for Stephanie tighten him up, knowing it must not. If Bull had her, Jim would have to be cooler than he'd ever been in his life.

He crossed the bench, ready to ride down and approach the ridge from another angle, when he noticed a clump of low bushes. It looked like someone had trampled it. When he swung out of the saddle and touched the branches the sap was still wet where they had broken. Excitement quickened in him and he left the roan and stepped silently over the rocky land searching for a further sign that Stephanie had passed this way.

Then he saw it. A piece of clean lace. He knew nothing about such things, but he guessed it could have come from a petticoat trim. Fingering it, Jim felt a great pride in Stephanie. She'd been cool under fire, taking time and finding opportunity to leave a sign for him to find.

One man alone had almost no chance, even if Jim found the entrance to the hidden roost. They'd killed him before he could save Stephanie. But if he waited until dusk the odds might be better. Not much, but some. At least three of the outlaws had been killed night before last, but who knew how many Bull had left?

There was one ace in the hole, admittedly a dubious one. But if the rider he'd seen in the moonlight was Reilly, that could pay off for Jim.

He crept along the rocks and came to a large boulder and circled it and stopped short. He was looking down the business end of a rifle held by a grim, scarred faced man.

"Drop your guns," he ordered and Jim let them fall, dropping the last piece of hankerchief at the same time. The bandit prodded Jim ahead of him, first stoppng to pick up the black handled guns, not noticing the shred of white cloth. "Lead your horse," he growled and the sheriff obeyed, careful not to make a false move.

The trail didn't wind enough for Jim

to get ahead and stop beyond a turn, then jump his captor. It plunged down until they were on a small canyon floor. There was a low building with smoke coming out the chimney, which Jim guessed was a combined bunkhouse and cookshack. Across from it was another cabin next to the corral that was undoubtedly Bull's headquarters.

A MAN SITTING by the bunkhouse glanced up at Jim indifferently and Jim managed to keep himself from giving any indication of his surging relief. Then Reilly sprang to his feet.

"Let me have him," he yelled. "Let me get my two hands on that son. He's mine, Scar."

"This one belongs to the boss," Scar barked.

Reilly pretended anger, but was willing to follow orders. "I'll take him to Bull. He's down with the girl." The Irishman stuck his menacing face in Jim's. "I'll settle up with you," he vowed.

"Take him to Bull before you kill him." Scar laughed. "I'll get back to my post."

"Get moving," Reilly ordered and Jim walked ahead. Outlaws poured out of the bunkhouse to see what went on. They let out whoops of joy recognizing the new sheriff of Bannock Springs.

The canyon was filled with long shadows even in mid-afternoon and Jim's eyes narrowed as he studied the layout. Without moving his lips Reilly said, "When we get to Bull I'll give you a gun. But there must not be any shooting because of the girl."

"Sure," Jim answered. "Is she all right?"

"So far. Now shut up."

The Irishman prodded Jim in the back with his gun, for the benefit of any onlookers. They went down the canyon floor and finally came to the end of it and headed for a cabin in the trees. But Jim wasn't looking at the cabin, he was staring beyond. The canyon floor ended here with a sharp drop to a small pocket, considerably above the level of the flat grazing lands beyond the hills. It was filled with cattle. That put the stolen herds on the south side of the ridge and Rand's ranch.

Reilly said softly, "There's a slick way to run them in and out. This cabin's the lookout point."

Jim felt panic rise because of Stephanie when they reached it and he fought to make himself relax. Panic was a new and strange experience for him.

They pushed in and Stephanie was sitting on a chair. She was pale, but there was no indication of any fear. Bull sat across from her, his thick legs stretched in front of him.

"You're a little late aren't you, Sheriff?" she asked and smiled. Jim's eyes held hers for a long second and he drew in a breath of relief and admiration.

Bull roared as he leaped to his feet. He shoved Reilly aside and came at Jim. Jim ducked a roundhouse right and jarred Bull with a wicked left to his chin. A chair went over as Bull staggered back and came forward fast. There were no rules in Bull's code, all he knew was sheer brute strength and no holds barred. He fought to kill.

One of his fists met Jim's mouth as he was coming in and knocked him across the cabin and half way out the door. With a bellow, Bull rushed in to follow up his advantage. He started a vicious kick at Jim's ribs just as Jim managed to catch his foot and twist it, throwing Bull off balance. Jim got to his own feet in time to meet the next enraged rush. Bull was rocked back when Jim's fist in his stomach brought air gushing from his lungs. They were outside the cabin and Bull rushed again, his great hands outstretched to choke life out of Jim.

This was barroom fighting, wicked

and ruthless. Bull pounded at Jim's body, grunting when he took blows in return. Sweat dripped down Jim's face as he stepped back to tear off his shredded shirt. He was fighting for his life and he knew it.

HIS FIST caught Bull coming in and his blow knocked the big man's head back. It was then Jim realized they were almost on the edge of the cliff and that one of them must go over. Step by step he forced Bull back, but Bull twisted and his hamlike fist slammed against the side of Jim's head and dropped him to his knees. Pain shot through him as he struggled up to meet the merciless pounding blows. Gasping for breath, he fought back blindly, slamming his fists into Bull's great body. *The edge of the cliff, the edge,* the edge, the words kept repeating and repeating themselves through Jim's head and it was the only thing that was real.

With a last terrific effort Jim put his hand in Bull's bloody face and pushed, then scrambled away from the edge. Bull staggered. He muttered curses and came at Jim. Only this time Jim caught a flash of steel in his hand and knew Bull had a knife.

In that split second of time before Bull was on him, Jim knew he'd never have a chance to tell Stephanie that he loved her. It had happened to him as suddenly as death. He drew in a long shattering breath and waited for Bull.

There was a single shot and Bull stumbled, his face twisted in stunned surprise as he fell on his face on the trampled ground.

Jim wiped the sweat out of his eyes and looked around. Stephanie, her face drained of color, stood with the smoking gun in her hand.

"You would have beaten him," she told Jim simply. "But when I saw the knife, I couldn't let him cut you up. I couldn't, Jim." Her voice was very soft. "I had to kill him."

He smiled. "I'm right glad about that, ma'am," he said.

"Stop that cooing nonsense," Reilly said. "Don't you know we're trapped. That gang heard the shot and they'll be on us, shootin' to kill when they see Bull."

Quickly, Jim pulled the big man to the edge of the cliff and shoved him over. They could hear his body crashing down through the brush and rocks. "That'll give us some extra time," Jim said. "At least they can't be sure he's dead." He took Stephanie's arm and turned her to the cabin. "You stay in there and Reilly and I'll do what we can."

Keeping close to the trees, they warily went back up the canyon as the rustlers were piling out of the bunkhouse.

Reilly said, "You're the kind of fighting fool, Jim an Irishman likes. Prettiest fight I ever saw." He smiled. "If you get out of this and I don't, I wish you'd tell Kitty I wanted to marry her, if she'd have me." He turned and whistled under his breath. "We got another gun."

Jim wheeled and looked into Stephanie's eyes. "I'm fighting with you," she said and he knew when a woman spoke like that, she meant it.

One of the outlaw's shot and Stephanie's gun answered and the man toppled.

Reilly grinned at her. "I want you on my side," he said and it was a high compliment.

Bullets chipped off the rock they stood behind and they fired back. Suddenly there was a fusillage from the trail leading down into the hideout. Pete was riding down the treacherous trail as fast as his horse could travel followed by the 9X riders.

THE RUSTLERS ran for cover back to the bunkhouse. The gun fight was furious as the outlaws tried to save themselves from capture. But as Jim snapped a shot in an open

window, he thought their hearts weren't in this fight. They seemed confused, as if waiting for Bull's orders. Guns kept blasting, but it was too long before someone tossed out a white towel as a signal of surrender. In a way, Jim supposed, it was a great compliment to Bull's leadership.

Scar was one of the first men out of the bunkhouse. "Where's Bull, Reilly?" he demanded.

"Dead," Reilly answered happily.

"We'll get the one who did it," Scar promised.

"You be thinking how to keep a rope from around your dirty neck. That'll keep you busy." Reilly helped fasten the rustlers' hands behind their backs. Then the 9X boys tied them on their horses.

It was then Pete turned to Jim, his face haunted. "Where's Stephanie?" his voice shook a little.

"Probably killing a few outlaws," Reilly chuckled.

"I'm here and fine," she called and ran from the rock. She'd stayed there to stop anyone from trying to escape over the cliff. She waved a red shirt at Jim. "I got it in the cabin." He took it gratefully.

Pete met her and put his arm around her. "Why did you come here, Stephanie?" He managed to smile. "I've sure been worried."

She smiled up at him and Jim's heart gave a great lurch and was still. He understood now. She loved Pete. "I found a note on my window sill that Bull Mullen had captured Jim," she explained. "If I came to a certain place in the hills I could arrange for his release, if I didn't the sheriff would be killed." She dug in the pocket of her divided skirt and brought out a crude map. "This was with the note. I had to come alone because Bull and his men would be watching."

Pete looked at her strangely. "You risked your life for Jim," he said.

"Bull intended holding me until uncle agreed to give him all the cattle in exchange." She smiled at Jim. "I dropped my yellow bows, then I managed to tear up part of my petticoat."

"I found them," Jim said quietly.

Pete took his arm from around her shoulders, his eyes looked haunted as he remembered the hours of anxiety he'd spent. "We thought you'd ridden to town, Stephanie. Then when we tried to pick up Jim's trail, one of the men found a yellow bow from your dress on a bush."

Pete took her hand and held it tightly and Jim turned abruptly to Reilly. "What were you doing here with Bull?"

Reilly grinned. "I started to head out for Texas and changed my mind. I wasn't going to run off without getting revenge on that crooked gambler. So I camped around here until Bull came. I told him I knew Bannock Springs like the palm of my hand and could set up a bank robbery, because I had a hate on the town." He wiped his face, smearing the dust, then built a cigarette. "Bull liked the idea but he wanted to get another Wells Fargo shipment, then Rand's cattle through Stephanie first."

"Were Silk and Bull working together?" Jim asked.

"Naw. I mean by that they weren't splitting any loot. Silk came in here with Bull, but my saloon was Silk's own idea." His face reddened with anger. "I planned to get any information I could and alert Hack, or preferably you, Jim, so you could be ready to capture the gang, Bull wasn't dumb, he just got greedy."

"There's a big reward on Bull." Pete told him."

"I know." Reilly's eyes twinkled. "Might be just enough to buy Kitty and me a little spread near town. After I kill Silk."

"Forget Silk," Jim said gruffly. When he went to get Stephanie's horse and his own he put on the shirt.

When he led the horses from the corral the four of them rode after the outlaws and their cowboy guards.

THE MOONLIGHT was bright as they rode and Stephanie was very quiet. Jim supposed she and Pete wanted to talk together without this crowd around them. Well, all he had to do was settle with Silk, then he and Rocky would return across the big county to their own ranch.

They left Stephanie at the ranch house and Pete and Reilly and he headed on to Bannock Springs with the outlaws. There were ten prisoners, so the two cells would be jammed.

Jim woke Hack up and at the jail Pete and Reilly helped search the outlaws and this time there weren't any hidden guns in any boots. Leaving Hack on guard, the three men went to the hotel through the sleeping town.

Dawn wasn't far away, Jim thought, as he knocked on Rocky's door. Rocky welcomed them gleefully and poured drinks.

"I was right lonely." He eyed Reilly and smiled. "You got one sweet girl, Irish. I'm kinda sorry you got your lasso on Kitty."

"I'm scared to see her," Reilly confessed. "She'll be blazing at me for ducking out like that."

They told Rocky about killing Bull and the roundup of the rustlers and finally Pete and Reilly went to their rooms to catch some sleep.

It was then Rocky told a story so incredible Jim could hardly believe it. By the time they finished talking and Jim had cleaned up, shaved and put on a shirt of Rocky's, Bannock Springs was waking up and Jim went downstairs to talk to Miss Bessie.

As he strode across the lobby Stephanie call him from the Ladies' Parlor. He turned, his heart churning.

"Stephanie," he said and his voice was unlike his own. "Pete's upstairs. I'll go get him."

"I didn't come to see Pete," she said softly. "I came to see you, Jim."

He stood there just looking down at her. The wonder of what he saw in her eyes dazzled him. Unconsciously, he reached out for her.

"I learned a lot of things in those hills," she said steadily. "Widow Makers like you made this land safe." She leaned her black head against his chest for a second and then drew back. "I don't want a weak man—ever."

"Wait," he almost groaned it. "Wait right here for me, Stephanie. I'll be right back. I've got to arrest Presley."

"Presley Adams?" She sounded as stunned as he'd been when Rocky first told him.

He nodded. "He's backing Silk's operation so he can grab the little ranches close to town. He's a sanctimoneous money hungry man who doesn't care how he gets it. He stole money from the bank to set Silk up with cash. Miss Bessie told Rocky that's why he wanted Hack sheriff, he knew Hack wouldn't cause any trouble."

She touched his arm. "Come back soon to me, Jim," she said.

"Always," he promised and in Stephanie's eyes he found everything a man could ever want.

Jim hurried to get his job over, knowing she'd be waiting. Knowing, too, he would never be lonely again.

★

Jenny thought that Ad was being foully wronged!

HASTY WEDDING

by ANN POPE

ADAM HOLCOMBE was not a drinking man, but this night circumstances had driven him to it. These particular circumstances being a woman, he strode into Buell's Saloon, looking sober and out of place in his black coat, stiff white shirt, wing collar and silk four-in-hand tie, and proceeded to down enough hard liquor to set two strong men staggering.

Ad was a blacksmith by inheritance and a gentleman by preference. He had position in the town and maintained it well. His only failing was his feelings for Madge Pickett. His love for lovely heedless Madge was as strong as the irons he forged daily in his shop; the only weakness in it was Madge herself.

The quiet intensity with which he drank was upsetting to behold. He stood there for about an hour, leaning against the bar, pouring down the whiskey with a determined look on his face. It was like he thought the stuff was magic and if he could just get a sufficient amount down, his troubles would vanish. The town clock was just striking nine when he seemed satisfied.

The streets were still, the air was heavy with the rich perfume of the locust trees, and it wasn't far to the Pickett house. He knew what he was going to do. The whiskey had burnt out his pride. His usual caution was shed like a snake's skin in the springtime. It didn't matter that he had looked up from the red heat of his anvil this afternoon, looked out the open doors into the bright sunlight and had seen Madge riding by in a fancy rig with a stranger, sitting close to him, laughing and acting like she had never been promised to Adam Holcombe to be his wife.

It didn't matter that he had been cooling his hot blood for the past year, working and saving for the cottage he was fixing so that he could have everything right and fine when he brought her into his house. He had been too careful. Too slow. To-night, he had dressed carefully, blistered his insides and dulled his common sense with

Buell's best whiskey, and let his desires take over. He was an impatient bridegroom hurrying through the night. The waiting was over. He would go get Madge, take her by force if necessary, and drive over to see Parson Dodge. They could be married before she had a chance to shake her pretty, wilful head.

The Pickett's shabby old house was close to the railroad tracks, almost up town. Here Mr. and Mrs. Pickett had produced their remarkable family. Seven girls, all beauties, from baby Alma to Cora Mae, they had hair that sprang into masses of ringlets and waves despite hit-and-miss brushings, eyes that were large and sweetly blue, fringed with lashes that were the despair of all the less recklessly prolific mothers of the town. The girls were cheerfully raising themselves, watched helplessly by their parents who viewed their blooming brood with more than a little uneasiness.

The evening train had already roared through and the neighborhood lay asleep, but Ad could see lights on in the Pickett kitchen. The soft yellow glow from the lamps lit the path as he pushed through the slack-hinged gate. There seemed to be a regular uproar going on inside. He could hear Mrs. Pickett bawling like a cow that's lost its calf and Mr. Pickett was bellowing at her to be quiet. Mr. Pickett was mild mannered most of the time, but having eight females around the house tended to make him nervous. Apparently tonight he had been pushed too far.

AD STEPPED up on the sagging front porch and called out genially, "Madge?" There was an immediate hush inside and he dropped down in the old fringed hammock to wait. Smiling fatuously to himself in the dark, he thought of all the loving things he would say when he had her nestled beside him. The gentle swaying of the hammock fanned the delayed action of the liquor into little thrills of heat in his stomach. "Madge!" he demanded loudly. "Madge, you come out here now. I've got something to say to you."

There was a rustle of subdued whispering in the house as they held a hurried conference. In the end, they sent young Jenny out to tell him. Neither Mr. Pickett nor Mrs. Pickett felt up to it. Ad had always seemed partial to Jenny, almost like a big brother, and it was decided that she could better break the news to him than either of her parents who were quite overcome with the evening's events.

Jenny smoothed her hands over her hair which she wore pulled back into a ribbon, twitched at the folds of her gingham frock until it circled neatly about the tops of her shoes, and stepped through the door.

"Madge?" he asked peering through the gloom.

"No. It's Jenny, Ad. Madge is gone— I mean she isn't here right now," Jenny answered nervously.

"I've got to see Madge, Jenny. You just tell me where she is and ol' Ad will go fetch her home. I've got to talk to that girl right now." He rose, half-stumbling and started toward her.

"Now, Ad," she said soothingly, "you just sit down a minute and let me tell you about it. Pa said I should tell you, that you had a right to know, and I guess you do."

"Know what? Jenny. I want you to tell me where Madge is. I came over here to-night to see her and I'm a'goin' to."

"Oh, drat that girl anyway!" Jenny exclaimed impatiently. "She's gone; gone for good as far as we know. She left on the train with that fellow who's been staying over at the hotel. She has been seeing him all week. She left a note saying that they were going to get married in Chicago."

"Married? That can't be, just can't be!" he repeated dully. "Madge is supposed to marry me. You know that, Jenny, don't you? We've been planning it all year. There's a mistake

somewhere. Madge wouldn't do a thing like this to me."

"Well, she did! You could have seen it coming if you wanted to. She never treated you right, not like she should have. She's always been just plain ornery, even if she is my own sister." Jenny was trembling with excitement and her desire to make him know how much she cared that he had been hurt. She had never talked to him alone before, not like this, like she was grown-up and could let him know how she felt. She had always managed to be around when he called on Madge, sitting on the porch or walking through the parlor on some unnecessary errand, but all he had ever done was tease her, ruffle her hair with his big, strong hand, and call her "sprout". Once he gave her a sack of rock candy but he spoiled it by saying it was for the "young 'un". She had waited until he and Madge had driven off and then she had thrown it away just as far and as hard as she could throw.

AD SAT DOWN heavily in shock and confusion. Jenny's words closed in about him leaving him in sad perplexity. The thing he had dreaded had caught up with him. Madge laughing with the stranger, riding by in the sunlight where he could look out from the heat of his work to see his shame... She had wanted him to know, wanted to hurt him and still he had refused to believe what his own eyes had told him! He was a fool, hard-working respectable Adam Holcombe was a fool. He had been warned and had laughed at the warnings.

Cutter's Falls was a little town, a town where people knew each other and saw things as they were. Folks knew the Pickett family and their short-comings. The girls were too pretty and there were too many of them for the sketchy living Mr. Pickett managed. Mrs. Pickett was too easy-going, too fond of sitting in the run-down parlor with paper backed novels while her daughters ran helter-skelter. But Ad hadn't wanted to see it, hadn't wanted to listen to the friendly hints that came his way. No, he had only wanted to see the heart-breaking beauty of Madge, had only wanted to warm himself with her easy laughter and careless ways.

The juices of raw anger began to pour into him. He wanted to hit back, hard, and yet there he sat befuddled with drink, with her little sister witnessing his misery.

"You'd better go on back in the house, Jenny. I'm just not fit for you to be with right now," he said roughly.

"Don't say that. Oh, don't ever say that, Ad. You're the finest man in this whole town. Madge is wicked to do a thing like this, just plain wicked. Any other girl in town would die of happiness to have you in love with her."

"You're too young to know about these things, Jenny. You just don't understand," he insisted thickly through his pain.

"I'm not too young!" she replied hotly. "I understand more than you think. I wouldn't have treated you like Madge did. I guess I'm old enough to appreciate you anyway."

"You shouldn't talk like that. You're only a little girl."

"Little girl!" This was too much. All the pent-up envy she had nursed against Madge and what she and Ad had had between them burst forth. "I am only two years younger than Madge and you call me a little girl! You've never ever taken a good look at me!" With a deft motion she ripped the ribbon off her hair so that it fell in a silken shower about her shoulders. She pulled angrily at the ruffles of her dress stirring up a soft haze of scent from her best lilac talcum which she used only on evenings when she knew he was coming to the house. Slipping into the hammock beside him, she let it throw her against him; the thudding of her heart was loud between them.

"Now, Jenny, there's Josie and

Gracie between you and Madge. I've always thought of you as being a little girl," he protested feebly. "But maybe I was wrong," he added as he got the full benefit of her perfume.

"You were wrong, Ad. I just don't know how you got such an idea. I'm next oldest after Madge," she lied sweetly. "I've liked you for such a long time, Ad. I'm not like her. I'll never want anyone but you, not as long as I live. Not even if you don't want me. I can't help it, Ad," she whispered the words; her breath softly tickling his ear. The relief of telling him at last of her too-early love was like a summer miracle.

Her words were balm to his wounds. Her warm weight was pressing against him, stirring something deep within him. It didn't matter anymore that he had come searching for a bride who had turned faithless, jilting him on the night when he had come to claim her. The inviting closeness of Jenny was more than he could resist. He felt an emotion that Madge had never aroused with her quicksilver ways, teasing and retreating. Jenny sat waiting, pliant with love for him. He turned, burying his head in her neck, nuzzling against the sweet comfort of her. The darkness folded them together.

SOMETIME later he murmured against her mouth, "Jenny, darling Jenny, will you come with me? Will you marry me now, to-night?" His head was still roiled with whiskey leaving him without his usual rudder of caution. The man within him was let loose, the hot-blooded lover, the man of decision. He was acting on instinct and it was telling him to take Jenny with all her young unspoiled love and loyalty.

Jenny's answer was given out of her trust in him. It was all her secret dreams come true. He rose, holding her close beside him as if she might escape and together they walked off the porch into the night.

IT WAS HIGH noon when they came back. Mr. and Mrs. Pickett were sitting in the parlor as if they were attending a corpse for burial. The rest of the girls were relegated to the kitchen where in shrill whispers they told the whole story to Cora Mae, the eldest, who had hurried right over after getting her husband off to work. The story of two of the Pickett girls kicking over the traces all in one night had spread over the town like wildfire. Into this funeral atmosphere walked a shame-faced Ad and a triumphant Jenny.

At the sight of them Mrs. Pickett threw her apron over her face and rocked to and fro. Strange keening sounds came from under the apron and her plump form shuddered with emotion. Mr. Pickett stood up and faced them, his slight figure drawn erect to defend his family's honor.

"We've come back, Mr. Pickett—sir. That is, we've come to have a talk with you," Ad spoke feebly, his eyes fixed on a faded cabbage rose in the carpet.

"You'd better talk fast, Mr. Holcombe. I've had more than a man can bear these past hours. I'm wantin' to know where you've been all night with my daughter," Mr. Pickett said firmly, his eyes gleaming with anger.

"Well, I can't rightly tell you all of it. For the life of me I can't remember a thing. Could I sit down, please?" he asked diffidently. "I've never felt so bad in my whole life."

"Sit and keep talking, mister."

"I guess the most important thing is that we up and got married last night. I'm not a drinking man, you know that for a fact, Mr. Pickett."

"I do. You're not a drinking man, Ad. I'll say that for you," Mr. Pickett agreed solemnly, eased by the all-important marriage announcement.

"Well, I got good and roaring drunk last night. First time I ever cut loose like that. I was mad clear through at Madge—well, never mind, that's anoth-

er matter entirely," he broke off in confusion. "The upshot of the whole thing is, I remember Jenny coming out on the porch to tell me about Madge. I remember that part all right, and the next thing I know it's morning, I'm in my own room over at the boarding house and there's Jenny with me, waving a paper and telling me it's a license and that we're all married up tight and legal by Parson Dodge, the one that lives out on the south edge of town. It does beat all, doesn't it? I even drove out there again this morning and Parson says sure enough we woke him up and he performed the ceremony. Knowing who I was and all, he thought it was all right," he shook his head slowly. "I just don't know what got into me. It must have been the liquor."

"WELL, I like that! You weren't talking that way last night, Adam Holcombe," Jenny spoke up indignantly. Her hair still fell in chestnut ringlets about her shoulders and in her pink gingham frock, still neat as her dresses always had been from the time she was a tiny thing, Jenny looked like a small doll propped up on the horse-hair sofa.

"Be quiet, Jenny," her father ordered. "How old is Jenny, Ma?" he asked in a businesslike manner. "She ain't old enough to be marrying, is she?"

"She'll be seventeen come August, but she's old acting. She always has been. She's got a good head on her shoulders, Ad. She'd make you a good wife," Mrs. Pickett said eagerly, grasping at straws.

"Sixteen! How she ever got me to do it, I'll never know. I never thought of Jenny, well, I just never thought of her in that way," he said meaningfully. "I don't think we're really married. That is to say, the ceremony part, that's done right and good, but as for the rest of it—I just don't think I could do a thing like that to her, drunk or sober. Maybe there's some way we could work it out—well, you know what I mean. If, we're not actually married that is." Ad looked nervously at the Picketts. In the cold light of day, he felt trapped. The night before was blank and his head ached unbearably. He wanted nothing so much as to walk out the door and never come back. They all looked at him coldly as he mumbled ineffectually about an annulment.

"I guess it's up to Jenny," Mr. Pickett said slowly. "Ad, here, he can't remember, but you do. Speak up, girl. You know what we're talking about. Young or not if Adam Holcombe took you as his wife last night, then it's your duty to cleave to him and him to you," Mr. Pickett pronounced with bibical solemnity.

Jenny straightened up, clutching her marriage license which she still had in her hand. Her father's meaning was all too clear. The paper was worthless if she told the truth, that Ad had brought her to his room only to fall asleep across the bed, mumbling of his "little Jenny", his ardor consumed by the heavy slumber of exhaustion.

She had sat till dawn watching over his sleep with silent admiration, scarcely believing the sudden wonder of his love. Bitterly, she faced facts. Ad was unwilling to take a sixteen year old as his bride. Last night it hadn't mattered. On the porch, in the dark, she had been a woman, ready and able to match his love. Now, she could lose him again because he was too stubborn to admit even to himself what they had felt for each other.

Quickly she made her decision, justifying it with her own love which she knew was strong enough for two. Demurely, she dropped her eyes and murmured, "I am Mrs. Adam Holcombe right enough, Pa. I remember, even if he doesn't."

"Jenny!" Ad burst out. "What are you saying?"

"I'm sorry, Ad. I believed you last night. I thought all the things you told

me were true." She continued to sit with downcast eyes, a picture of injured dignity.

"Well, that settles it. It's up to you now, Ad. She's yours come what may," her father announced with a decided air of relief.

Ad stood up shakily. "All right. So be it. I'll do what's right, but you'll have to give me a little time. I'll have to make some arrangements, see to some things," he said vaguely. "It won't hurt to wait for awhile. You stay here, Jenny, for the time being. Here," he emptied his pockets and pushed the money into her lap, "take this for anything you need. I'll take care of you and we'll talk later about what we're going to do. Right now, I've got to be going," and he rushed out of the house like a horse released to pasture.

THE SUMMER days flew by. Ad worked like a man possessed. The sound of heavy blows being struck rang out from his shop from morning until late at night. There was a smell of brimstone in his fires and he stuck to his job like the devil himself was forcing him to it. He worked hard, slept restlessly, and avoided the Pickett household at all costs, mollifying any possible protests from Jenny's parents with generous sums of money which he sent regularly to his wife by way of messenger.

Over at the house by the tracks young Jenny bided her time in the age-old feminine game of waiting. She was far from idle. Jenny was crowding several years of growing up into weeks. Nowadays her hair was coiled neatly on top of her head. She made important purchases with the money Ad gave her, yards of fine lawn, challis and voile, narrow satin ribbon to be sown on net to form the new high-styled yokes with their cunningly concealed stays, slippers dainty and interlaced in intricate basket-woven satin, a string of amber beads to clasp around her slender neck, a confusion of lace and insertion, and a bottle of attar-of-rose perfume with a little velvet rose fastened on top.

She made no effort to see Ad, being content to sit busily plying her needle, glancing now and then for reassurance at her marriage license which she had framed in black passepartout and hung above the brass bed which she still shared with Gracie.

In Cutter's Falls in 1901, marriage was a highly respectable institution. Once thoroughly married there was little a person could do except face up to double harness no matter how lamely their partner might be pulling the load. Jenny was willing to let things ride. Ad wasn't going anywhere. He was her husband and her husband he would stay. As for his scruples about her age, she dismissed that as being ridiculous. In a way it was too, for few girls reached the ripe old age of eighteen without achieving a well-established state of matrimony. As far as Jenny was concerned, Ad was merely using it as an excuse to hide his embarrassment over having hastily married her in lieu of the still absent Madge.

Meanwhile, she held herself aloof, happily working on her new wardrobe with which she intended to charm Ad when he stopped being so foolishly stubborn. And of course there were always chores to be done about the house. A goodly share fell to Jenny in her new maturity. These days Mrs. Pickett was solacing herself by re-reading "St. Elmo" punctuated by verbal harrages against Madge whom she described as ungrateful and unfeeling in her failure to let them hear from her.

By mid-August, just after Jenny's seventeenth birthday had made her a more eligible candidate for wifery, Ad began to make appearances at the house once more. Gingerly, he would sit on the edge of a chair in the parlor making stilted conversation with Jenny who politely deferred to his timidity and sat across from him, answering formally to his repeated queries about the state of her health and his uninspired

comments on the local weather conditions. Her heart ached over his apparent discomfort. She longed to run her fingers over the thick blackness of his hair, to fit her cheek against the strong hollow lines of his face, but she sat primly with folded hands avoiding his somber grey eyes.

AFTER SITTING through a number of these tentative visits, she dared to invite him for Sunday dinner, an invitation which, in Cutter's Falls, if accepted by a young man put a certain seal of formality on his intentions. He accepted. It was a proud day for Jenny. The table was heaped with the fruits of her labors, chicken, crisp and golden heaped on the best ironstone platter, potatoes whipped into fluffy whiteness with butter, sprinkled generously with hot black pepper, swimming on top in a pool of richness, tomatoes and cucumbers sliced and soaked in cider vinegar, beets and hard-boiled eggs mingled together in dark red tartness, and the pies! Green apple, a medley of sweet-sour goodness, raisin, brown and nutty, and custard, trembling with tenderness, and all of them cradled in crusts that bespoke the cook's deft hand. It was a meal to tempt a man to rashness. Jenny stepped about the kitchen fresh and cool in her starchy white apron, blushing properly under the seige of compliments. The Pickett girls turned out in full force and spared no effort to let Ad know that such culinary excesses were as nothing to Jenny. An everyday occurance they loyally declared.

And still he remained adamant. His calls continued, but the courting, if you could call it that, mired down in his reluctance to advance. It was as though something was holding him back against his will.

And then one blazing mid-day, Madge stepped off the Chicago train.

With casual elegance, she sauntered past the loafers on the platform, her black gown trailing indolently through the dust, it's jet buttons winking like black diamonds in the sunlight, a small round turban tilted over one eye with a red nose riding high and impudent in the veiling that swathed it.

Within an hour she had re-established herself. She accepted calmly the clucking cries of happiness from her mother and the swarming admiration of her sisters. Trunks were unpacked and gifts disposed of. It was a time of homecoming and forgiveness. Her explanations of her flight were sketchy and given with indifference. She had changed her mind about getting married. As simple as that! There were hints of powerful connections in the city which had been offered to her, and, in guarded whispers, the revelation that she was considering returning to Chicago to go on the *stage!* It all seemed possible. She looked like a lady of fashion, a person set apart all ready from the hum-drum limitations of Cutter's Falls. Only Jenny hung back from the circle of her charm, retreating to her room to feast her eyes on the framed solidity of her marriage license which hung in mockery above her maiden's bed.

IT WAS HERE that Madge found her. She closed the door and stood against it. The glint in her eye was one that Jenny knew of old. It had been there when she snatched dolls from her protecting arms, when she appropriated scarves and lockets; it was there now, strong, as she looked in derision at the passepartout frame which seemed tawdry and trifling under her glance.

"They told me about you and Ad," she said slowly. "You shouldn't have done it, Jenny. Ad is mine. He always will be."

"We are married. It's too late, Madge. You can't do anything about it. I'm his wife," Jenny answered defiantly.

"I don't think you are. Pa said Ad

would have got an annulment the next day. Pa said that it was only your word that kept him married to you. That word was a lie, wasn't it, Jenny?" She clutched Jenny's arm viciously through its thin voile sleeve. "You are a lying little sneak. Admit it! I'm going to have him back and you're going to tell him that you trapped him with a lie!"

"No!" Jenny sobbed helplessly, twisting away from her cruelly tight grasp. "I won't. I love him. You would just hurt him again. No matter what you do, I won't give him up."

Madge dropped her arm in disgust. "You're such a baby. Crying won't help you any. It's easy enough to find if you're lying. A married woman knows things that you don't know. Ad didn't want a little girl. He wants a woman." Her eyes narrowed.

"Get out!" Jenny turned from the ugliness in Madge's voice.

"I'll go. I'm going to find Ad and tell him that you lied, that he is free. And if you know what is good for you, you'd better keep quiet. You've done enough talking." With cold finality, Madge left the room leaving Jenny crumpled by her attack. Her hopes, which had been cheapened and belittled, seemed suddenly childish and useless.

THE FIRES in his forge were cooling after the day's labors when Madge walked into Ad's shop. The doors were flung open to let in the sweet evening coolness. Ad watched her coming toward him in the dusk. The last flickering flames burnished her beauty to a high luster. He stood caught in her brightness.

"I've come back to you, Ad," her voice was husky with meaning. "There never was anyone else, not really. You believe me don't you, Ad?" she pleaded.

"I'm married, Madge," he said dully. "It can't make any difference about you and me. I'm married to Jenny."

Madge came close to him, circling his neck with her arms, pulling him close to her. She seemed to revel in pushing her fine clothes against the grease, as if dirtying them would prove her honesty. He was more exciting to her now than he had ever been in his devotion. She quickened to the delight of taking him from the gentle grasp of her sister.

"You're not married, darling. You never have been. Jenny was lying. I made her tell me. You can get out of it easy. She won't fight it anymore. I can promise that." She threw back her head, laughing with rich enjoyment. "Oh, Ad! I wish you could have seen her! She collapsed like a toy balloon. I had it all out of her in five minutes. Little Miss Prim! She's a sly one. She's been crazy about you since she was twelve years old. All she needed was a chance to get you alone and she pulled her nasty little trick."

Deliberately he took her arms from about him and stepped back. "I said I'm a married man, Madge. What passes between a man and his wife is nobody else's business, not even her own sister. It ain't fitting that Jenny should answer any of your questions."

"Oh, Ad! Don't be a fool! She trapped you and I know it." Again

Madge came close to him. "Listen, darling, it can all be like it was before. Only better. We won't wait any longer."

"Madge, I want you to stop talking this way. It's my fault that you got the wrong idea. I haven't been waiting to be a convenient husband for you, and Lord knows you must be needing one now. I shouldn't have left Jenny with her folks so long, but she was so young. I thought to give her a little time to get used to me. That was a mistake. I can see that now. I've waited too long again, but I'm going over right now to see Jenny. And I pray to God that it's not too late."

HIS THOUGHTS dwelt lovingly on Jenny as he strode through the twilight toward her. We've all been playing games like children. Jenny's been the only really grown-up one, the only one who wasn't afraid of life and marriage and taking a chance on the man she loved. How plucky she'd been through the long summer, waiting for him like a lady, never once trying to force his hand. And Madge, he tried to reason out how he felt about her—Madge would always follow a crooked path, taking the wrong turnings, but he wished her well along her way.

It was just dark when he stepped up on the sagging old porch once more. In the kitchen he could see Jenny moving about lighting the evening lamps.

"Jenny?" he called. "Can I talk to you?"

Resignedly she came to the door. She had composed herself to meet him and readied herself to release him. What had to be done she was prepared to do. There was no last lingering hope that Madge's mischief had not wiped out.

"I'm here, Ad. You don't need to say it. I admit I was wrong and I'm sorry. I lied to you and Pa, but you can do anything you want to now. I won't stop you. I'll tell Pa the truth."

"You won't be telling him anything. I guess a husband has got some rights, and I don't want a wife that goes around talking too much. We've talked too much all ready, Jenny, too much entirely. Come here."

"Oh, Ad!" she sobbed against his chest. "I never thought you'd come back."

His big hand moved slowly over her hair with a gentle cradling touch. "I'm here, sweetheart," and he kissed her to prove it. "I never really was away."

"I'm so ashamed, Ad—so sorry."

"Jenny, darling! *You mustn't ever be ashamed.* I've known all summer what happened that night."

"But, Ad—"

"Hush! Let me say it. You mustn't ever think you tricked me. You didn't, not at all."

"Ad, I did! I—"

"Not for one minute, not after my head stopped feeling like a mule had kicked me and I could get everything straightened out. I'm the one to be ashamed. It was a shabby thing to do to you."

Only the rhythmical song of the katydids broke the silence as Ad stopped her protests with kisses. "It wasn't right, Jenny. You deserved courting and maybe a mite of coaxing like any girl's got a right to expect, and especially my girl. In my own clumsy way that's what I've been trying to do these past weeks, make up to you what you missed. I reckon I'll be courting you the rest of my life, Jenny, if you'll let me, that is."

Womanlike, she remained completely unconvinced by his words, but if he wanted to believe that his reluctance had stemmed only from a desire to woo her—why so much the better. Mentally she sent a message of thanks to Madge who, without meaning to at all, had sent Ad flying, back where he belonged. Contentedly she s n u g g l e d against him, and if there was a small secret smile on her lips, who was to see it?

THE END

Love is a hard thing when it hurts someone who is close to you.

I LEARNED TO BE A LADY

I sat on the front steps listening to the coyotes, feeling easy for the first time since I arrived home the day before. Being back home at the ranch was a whole site different from the city that was bustling in these progressive years of the 1890's. I heard horse's hoofs and waited eagerly to see who was coming.

"Todd!" I called, standing on the step. I smiled, thinking it was mighty neighborly of him to ride over to see me. I used to think I was in love with him, but that was when I was a child.

"Howdy, Sandy," he drawled, opening the gate and walking up the path. I had forgotten how tall and straight he was, with his lean hips and wide shoulders above the flat waist. He stood a long minute looking at me, his eyes grave.

I wished I had worn riding pants and a shirt and that my copper hair wasn't scooped up in curls, but I stood straight in my ruffled dress, my head held at an angle which I'd learned in school.

"Well?" I demanded, feeling out of place in my city get-up.

Todd turned his hat in his hands. "You sure have changed, Sandy. It don't hardly seem like you're the same sweet little spitfire what left here last round-up time."

I felt anger churning up in me. "What did you expect?"

"Well, gosh, I..." He grinned. "I don't reckon I figured you'd turn out to be like Vicky."

"Vicky?" my voice exploded. "Since when have you started calling that stringy fake by a sweet name?"

A slow blush spread across his face. "I thought we might take a ride together tonight. I..."

"Really!" my voice was smug, "I'm not dressed for it."

"Well, gosh, you could whiz in and

change while I'm saddling Whitefoot. It's a real pretty night with a new moon and all." He grinned sheepishly. "You've been gone a long spell and I sure missed you."

I caught my breath. It wasn't like Todd to sweet talk. Of course, I had realized that he was sweet on me before I became a lady last year in the girl's "finishing" school.

"I can't. I guess I'd better tell you now. I'm going to get married. . . ."

"Well, gosh, sure you are," he broke in. "Me and you settled that a couple of years ago. That's what I figured on asking you when we rode along together tonight, but now that you brought it up, I reckon we can settle it here on the steps."

Tears stung my eyes. "You don't understand, Todd. It's Anthony Bugsbee I'm going to marry. He's coming tomorrow and we're going to have a barbecue—you come—and announce our engagement."

Todd looked at the gate steadily. "You're spoofing, Sandy girl. Well, gosh, you can't go entertaining any ideas of chasing off with a stranger." He looked as though he were going to shake me. "Who is this stray, anyhow?"

"He's not a stray. He teaches at the school where I went. And he's visited on ranches and he's a good cowhand and. . . ."

Todd snorted. "What about our understanding?"

"I'm real sorry, Todd. I. . . ." I faltered. I saw his hard leaness and his clear blue eyes that didn't show much because of the crinkly lines from looking far into the distance. I shook my head.

"Sometimes, Todd," it was important that he understand, "sometimes you don't fall in love with the man you *want* to. Sometimes, it sneaks up on you and there's not a blessed thing you can do about it."

Todd looked tired. Suddenly I knew I was going to cry. Love was a hard thing when it hurt someone who was close to you. I jumped up and ran into the house.

Pa looked up. "Sandy, you ain't no crying woman." I ran on, but heard him say to Ma, "I tell you that school plumb ruined her works!"

THE NEXT morning when I came to breakfast, Pa was ranting about Anthony. "Like I been saying all along, it was a bad mistake sending a good cowgirl like Sandy to the city for schooling. This here education business sure did ruin a crackerjack man's woman."

I looked at Pa and smiled. I could be tolerant. Anthony would be here within hours. "Why, Pa?" I asked gently. I broke off a bite of bread and buttered it.

"Galloping Juniper!" Pa said to Ma. "See how she's eating like a bird. Them manners ain't aimed for the range woman." He put a quarter pound slab of butter on a thick slice of bread.

Ma smoothed down her thick red hair and tried to hide a smile.

"Take you," Pa continued "A mighty fine lady. Knowed it the first time I set eye on you when you come to teach. Wooed and won you, I did, and you set right down to western ways without no fanciness."

I lowered my eyes. Seemed like Pa was all Ma ever wanted.

Ma's voice was low. "Jim, a young girl, especially a girl raised on a ranch, needs to be with other girls. That's why I insisted. . . ."

"Yeah, I know. We had to send her to that there finishing school so's she'd get slicked up into a lady." He buttered another slice of bread. "Seems to me like they *finished* up what was a pretty critter."

He swallowed and gulped coffee out of a tin mug. "Another thing," he waved his knife at me, "what's this here fellow coming here for? I figured

since you was a tot setting your first horse that you'd hook up with Todd Marks come hitching time."

"I told you," my chin stuck out defiantly, "I'm going to marry Anthony."

"Galloping Juniper!" Pa's eyebrows bristled. "I ain't going to have my kid tying up with a dude and living one of them hot-house lives in the city. Won't get no fresh air there. Won't hear no more about it."

I shoved back my chair and looked into Pa's eyes that were so like my own. "We're going to meet him now and you be nice to him or I'll...."

Ma sipped coffee serenely. "Why, Sandy, I know we'll like your friend." Pa strangled on his coffee and Ma ignored him. "Of course, being a city girl myself, I understand how exciting it seems after the ranch. But I wouldn't go back there to live for anything." She laughed. "I guess you might say it's who you're with that's important, not where you are." She leaned over and patted Pa on the cheek and he smiled.

I had a feeling of defeat...

PA AND I took the buckboard in to meet the train. I was nervous and Pa's lips were squelched together. But I was real proud of Anthony when he stepped off the train. I knew he had never looked handsomer than he did now in his white starched collar and dark suit. His black derby was flat on the top of his head and his neat black mustache was dashing. I felt now that he'd show Pa and Todd how a man ought to look, instead of wearing work clothes all the time, except for buryings, marryings and church meetings. I climbed down and ran to meet him.

Back at the buckboard, I said, "Pa, this is Anthony Bugsbee."

"How do you do, Sir?" Anthony asked.

Pa stuck out a hand the size of a ham and Anthony winced at the vigorous handshake. "Climb in," I said. "Throw your gear in the back. I'll drive."

"Oh, I say," Anthony spoke precisely. "You'll ruin your hands."

Pa spit over the side. "Reckon she's been driving all her life."

"My word," Anthony's voice was shocked.

I put the horses into a trot. "Hang on," I cried gaily. Anthony clutched his derby on his head with one hand and hung onto the side of the buckboard with his other hand.

Pa grinned. "Ain't nothing like a spot of fresh air to pick you up."

Anthony nodded. I had to restrain myself from kicking Pa in the shins...

THE NEXT morning I knocked on Anthony's door at daybreak. "Breakfast. Come and get it," I called. "Put on riding clothes. I'll show you the ranch afterwards."

He grunted. "Breakfast? It's still dark."

"We get up early. Do the chores before it gets blooming hot."

A few minutes later, he arrived at the table wearing his dark English riding habit.

Pa raised his eyebrows. "Thought you were going riding. Them duds ain't fitting."

Anthony seemed embarrassed. "This is the accepted riding habit in the city," he said stiffly.

Pa scraped his chair back, stood up and walked around him, surveying the outfit. "Darnest get-up I ever seen. Mean to say that wool," he rubbed a piece of the material between his fingers, "don't pick up horses' hair? Sure is nice and absorbent for sweat too."

Anthony looked him in the eye. "We take care of our mounts. We don't race them and they don't sweat."

Pa glanced at me. "Don't run, eh? Well, well, what do you know?" Grinning, he sat down at the table.

I saw Anthony's surprised look as Ma set his plate before him. There were three eggs, sunny-side-up, and

a thick stack of hotcakes. "If that's not enough," Ma said, "there's plenty more on the stove."

"Really, I don't eat a heavy breakfast."

Pa folded a hotcake neatly into a bite. "This ain't big. You oughta see what I put away come round-up time."

I felt like throwing my coffee at Pa. Anthony couldn't help it if he was city bred and hadn't had the rare opportunities of open living that Pa had.

"Heard you say you two was going to ride this morning," Pa said conversationally. "Reckon I'll ride along with you a spell. Got a few calves I figure on branding. Need your help, Sandy." As an afterthought, he added, "Strong man like Anthony will come in handy too."

Anthony coughed. His eyes looked glassy.

I said coldly, "I've changed my mind. I don't think we'll ride this morning."

"Huh?" Pa asked. "You afraid Anthony can't do the work?"

"Leave him alone! He can do it, all right, but...."

Anthony spoke. "I'm ready, any time."

"But, Anthony, you don't have to." I sighed. Times like these, when Pa was egging me on, I couldn't handle him. I looked at Ma who was humming at the kitchen stove.

"Ma, can't you...."

"What, dear?" She looked out the window. "It's such a nice morning, I think I'll ride along too."

"Well, Anthony and I may come in earlier than you do."

Pa's voice boomed heartily. "Don't figure on being out more'n five, six hours. Just enough for a pepper-upper."

IT FELT good being astride Whitefoot. I put the horse into a gallop and felt the cool breeze ruffle my hair. I slowed and waited for Anthony. His horse ran abreast of mine, with Anthony bouncing clear out of the saddle, letting a lot of air in between his seat and the saddle. He was breathing hard.

"Guess I'm sort of out of practice," he panted.

Ma and Pa galloped past. "Meet you at the creek," Pa bellowed.

When we arrived, the campfire was smoking and the coals were red-hot. Ma was holding the branding iron over the coals.

Pa rode up, herding some short yearlings. "Give me a hand, son," he called. "You hold the critters while I brand them."

Anthony hesitated.

"You ain't scared of no baby calf, is you?" Pa yelled.

Determinedly Anthony walked toward Pa. "Certainly not, but I've had no experience along this line."

"Can't learn no sooner than now."

When Pa placed the iron on the calf's rump, it lurched, throwing Anthony to his seat. "Galloping Juniper!" Pa's voice was impatient. "Sandy! Come here and hold these critters."

"Pa, leave Anthony be. He's not a common cowhand. He's educated and he doesn't have to do things like this!"

"Ain't riding him none. Come on and help me."

I walked up to the calf, grabbed its hind legs and threw it to the ground in a smooth movement. "Okay, Pa. Get going."

Hair singed and flesh burned and the calf cried frantically. I grounded another one. "That sure was a neat job, Pa. Couldn't of done it better myself."

I looked around for Anthony. He was draped over with his face down. I called, "What's wrong, Anthony?"

"I guess it was the smell of burning flesh." His face had a greenish tinge. "I'll be all right in a moment."

Ma and Pa pointedly ignored him. After we finished the branding, Ma called that chow was on. Anthony walked slowly toward the spread on the ground.

"It sure smells good, doesn't it?"

I linked my arm through Anthony's.

"I'm not hungry. I just want a cup of coffee."

Pa was surprised. "Don't this pure fresh air make you starving?"

"No, I...."

I was hungry clean down to my toes, but I said staunchly, "A cup of coffee for me too."

"Galloping Juniper, Ma. Sandy ain't nothing but a pale swooner now." He glared at me. "I'm a'going to get you looking like a healthy cowgirl like you are."

THAT EVENING Anthony was still weak. He also had difficulty sitting and he was so stiff that it was hard to stand. He explained his predicament to me and I was sympathetic, but a little disappointed in him.

I watched as he limped off to bed, saying, "I do believe I'll be more comfortable lying on my stomach."

When I turned around, Pa dropped his eyes, but I had seen his amused grin. Ma had her eyes riveted to a piece of embroidery work. Angrily, I placed my hands on my hips. "So what if he does have a weak stomach and seat? That doesn't prove a thing!"

Pa allowed, "You put it real nice. I didn't."

"But I know what you're thinking!" I couldn't understand why I was so mad at Ma and Pa. "He's smart and a real gentleman. Besides," I added smugly, "wait until the dance following the barbecue. We'll show you some new city steps."

My anger left suddenly. I said absently, "Wonder where Todd is." I knew I shouldn't think about him, but I couldn't help it. After all, I reassured myself, he was only a friend left over from growing up.

Pa gazed at the ceiling. "Seems right reasonable he's not hanging around seeing how you're all tied up. Anyhow, way I hear it, Victoria Smyth is mighty interested in him."

"Pooh. Todd wouldn't look at that horse-faced, skinny prune."

"Seems as how Todd's been holding her off waiting for you to come home, but I reckon he figures closing in time's come." He stretched out his legs. "Sure will be nice for him getting her pa's ranch what adjoins his. Not to speak of all that wad of cash when her pa cashes in his chips. Real dandy set-up, if you ask me."

"Nobody's asking you!" I snapped.

Ma looked up. "I do declare, dear," she said mildly, "you do seem a bit nervous."

Pa grinned. "It's that living without no pure air in the city. Saps vitality out of folks. Pales them up considerable too."

"Todd couldn't love Victoria. He loves me," I said slowly. "Besides she can't sit a saddle and she's soft like clabber."

"Been noticing some folks like their intended soft and mild," Pa observed.

"Oh! It's gotten to the place where a girl can't even talk things over with her family."

"What things, dear?" Ma put down the embroidery.

I spoke hesitantly, "It's not fair, that's all. You ought to see Anthony in the city. Then it would be you and not him that would be out of place."

"Yeah?" Pa perked up. "You still figuring on me telling folks about the coming marrying at the barbecue?"

I looked him in the eye, but my stomach was churning. "Certainly." I felt as though I were being forced into this marriage against my will. Suddenly I saw Todd's serious blue eyes. I straightened my shoulders impatiently. I mustn't think of him now. I was going to marry Anthony. Quick tears stung my eyes.

Pa scratched his knee. "Like you say, Anthony seems like a nice dud....man to me. After all," he stared into space, "we can't go expecting him to know about ranch living.

He ain't had the chance we had. Reckon maybe it took you a spell to get used to city living."

"Pa, you mean you really like him?"

"Ain't saying that exactly. Not one to jump to conclusions. But he does seem flabby next to Todd. But like I say, city living does that." He looked at me. "Sure hate to think of you getting softened up like Victoria." He scratched his knee harder. "Now there's a filly what would take to city living like a horse takes to oats."

A glint came into my eyes. "Yes, but...." I took a deep breath.

"Hear her and Todd is fixing to marry up right soon now," he continued. "When a man sets his head to settle down, he's likely to take what's close at hand."

He stood up. "Reckon I better write down a pretty speech so's I can give you away in real style." He sounded downright enthusiastic about getting rid of her.

"Yes, dear. Do that." Ma's voice was silky. "I know you'll make a real nice speech."

I WAS QUIET the next day. My thoughts were all jumbled up as I tried to figure things out. Anthony was relieved that there was no riding scheduled, so he set about to talking ranch customs at breakfast.

"Is it true," he asked, "that one of your main diversions is hangings?"

Pa cleared his throat. "Tell you, ain't much out here for amusement, excepting what we make ourselves and sometimes a burying or marrying. A nice neat necktie party's jest about one of the biggest things here. Everybody brings their eats for a good get together and visit."

Anthony's face paled. He turned to me. "I certainly hope you've never witnessed one of these brutalities."

Without thinking, I said, "No, but after breakfast, I'll show you a tree out back where they strung up two cattle rustlers. Like to see it?"

Anthony gagged. "Some other time," he said faintly.

Pa boomed. "About that barbecue we're throwing tomorrow night, to tell about you and Sandy getting hitched up, I was thinking maybe...."

Anthony stood up. "That's very kind of you, but unfortunately I have to return this afternoon." He turned to me, "I'd like to talk to you alone."

Pa poked his face up to Anthony's. "You ain't figuring on running out on my little girl, is you?"

Anthony reared back. "Certainly not. I...."

Pa backed off. "That's real nice because jilting a woman's pretty near as bad as cattle rustling. Sure would hate to see you strung up."

"Leave him alone, Pa." I turned to Anthony. "Let's go walking."

WHEN WE came in later, my eyes were sparkling and Anthony seemed relieved. "Pa," I said, "we want to talk to you."

"Later," Pa said. "I'm thinking. Reckon I have to make a dandy giving away speech."

"But, Pa. It's important. We...."

Pa picked up his pencil and paper and walked outside.

We went into the kitchen. "Ma, we have something to tell you."

Ma smiled serenely. "Isn't that nice? But I have to start dinner now. Suppose we wait until then."

"Sometimes," I said with feeling, "my family doesn't understand me."

Anthony nodded.

We walked outside to the porch. In a few minutes Victoria and Todd rode up.

"We come calling," Todd said cheerfully, avoiding my eyes. "Figured we all ought to meet up."

I said stiffly, "Victoria, may I present Anthony Bugsbee? He's...."

Victoria twittered, "Oh, my. You're that handsome professor from the city I've been hearing about. Isn't it just like a man to pick a tomboy like Sandy

when poor little me," she giggled, "just hates the country?"

My lips twitched into a smile as Anthony bent over to kiss Victoria's limp hand. Todd grinned and looked at the roof of the house.

An idea came to me. "Let's dance in the parlor."

Anthony and Victoria looked surprised, but Todd drawled, "Might be real entertaining."

"In the daytime?" Anthony asked.

Inside, I put a round, cylinder record on the victrola and turned the handle. I said off-handedly, "Anthony and I will teach you some new city steps. They're catchy."

I'd help Anthony all I could. He might be educated, but he could sure use Victoria's money for easier city living. And then, when she and Todd were dancing, she would make him the happiest man on earth.

"Like this," I said as Anthony and I whirled stiffly through the steps.

Todd grinned. "Think I got it. Come on, Vicky. Let's show them how to do the step real easy."

My mouth dropped as I watched them. They were dancing a lot better than Anthony and I. "Where did you learn those steps?"

Todd was nonchalant. "Learn lots of things when we take cattle to market. Get around right smart there."

Vicky giggled.

Pa's laugh rang through the room. He lounged against the door. "Sure is some surprise, ain't it, Sandy?"

I thought the evening would never end as Anthony and I danced stiffly and Victoria and Todd danced smoothly and easily. I wondered why Todd didn't suggest changing partners, but he didn't seem to even notice me. I bit my lower lip and tried to smile.

Finally Victoria and Todd left in high spirits.

THAT EVENING after Anthony went to his room, I said, "Ma, I've got to talk to you."

"Yes, dear," Ma said.

"Anthony and I think we're making a mistake. We aren't getting married, after all."

Ma spoke soothingly. "All girls feel that way when the time to marry comes close. When you're living in the city, you'll be glad you married him."

"I won't! Why, Todd knows more than he does—even about dancing."

Pa pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket. He unfolded it carefully. "I want to say my marrying-off speech to you."

"We're not getting married. You hear?" I ran out of the room.

THE NEXT morning I told Anthony that I hadn't convinced my family that we weren't getting married. But I didn't have time to discuss it because Victoria and Todd came visiting again.

"Why aren't you working?" Sandy asked Todd.

"Does a man good to take off time for fun now and then." His eyes twinkled.

Anthony headed straight for Victoria. Suddenly he tripped on a rock and fell against her horse. It reared up on its hind legs as Anthony clutched the saddle horn trying to keep his balance. Of its own accord, the horse placed its two front feet on the ground and stood still.

"Oh," Victoria screeched, "you saved my life!" Before she swooned, I saw that she carefully draped her arms around Anthony's neck.

"I did, didn't I?" Anthony's voice was awed. Then he lugged Victoria out of the saddle and staggered with her to the shade of a tree. "Poor, frightened little thing," he said.

That was more than I could take. "She's not scared and she's not passed out. It's one of her tricks, that's all. Why, I'd be ashamed to...."

Todd lifted me by my two stiff elbows and carried me, kicking toward the porch. "Leave them alone, Sandy."

I jerked my head around. "You're no better than she is. Letting Anthony coo to her when you're going to get married."

"What?" He dropped her abruptly. "Who said I was going to marry her?"

"You're not?"

"Never figured on anybody but you. Like a hightempered woman. Good way to tell if she's a thoroughbred. Like a horse."

My face got red. "Now you're comparing me with a horse!"

"Didn't say that. Figured I was making a pretty speech." He ran the toe of his boot in the sand. "Reckon I don't have the right to be talking to you like his now that you and that stray there...."

I looked at Victoria and Anthony. She was coming out of her self-induced swoon. "Oh," Victoria said weakly, "my hero. You saved my life and now I'm all yours."

Todd covered the distance between them in nothing flat. "See here, Bugsbee," he said threateningly, "don't get carried away with her offer. You're already promised and I don't calculate you'll be accepting Vicky's proposition."

I stood beside Todd. "Hold up, Todd. Don't say another word." I looked at the two, then I looked up at Todd. "Make a real nice looking couple, don't they?" Looking at Anthony, I asked, "You like the looks of this filley?"

Coldly he replied, "If you're referring to Miss Victoria, I find her extremely attractive and a man in my position must choose a mate carefully."

Todd's voice was cold as steel. "You slandering Sandy? You inferring she ain't fit to be a dude's wife?"

Anthony swallowed with difficulty. "I intended no slander. Sandy and I...." he paused. "What I intended to say is that Miss Victoria is all any man could desire." He stood up. "My

congratulations on your fortunate selection of a mate."

"Well, gosh," Todd said. "We got our strings all jangled up. I ain't planning on marrying Vicky."

"And I," I said, "am not planning to marry Anthony. We decided last night."

"You're free," Anthony said to Victoria. He shook Todd's hand with real feeling. Then he looked at Victoria tenderly. "In that case, Miss Victoria, do I have your permission to see you home?"

She giggled and nodded.

"I think a walk would be best. We can talk. How far is it?"

"Five miles," Vicky tittered.

Anthony took a deep breath. "A walk will limber me up."

"I just hate riding, don't you?" She fluttered her eyelashes.

Todd and I silently watched as the two walked away—Victoria with a spring in her step and Anthony with a pronounced limp.

I took a deep breath and looked up into Todd's squinty blue eyes. As he leaned down to kiss me, Pa strode out of the house, waving a piece of paper.

"I just gotta practice my giving away speech on somebody. How does it sound?" He stopped, his mouth ajar.

"The speech will be fine, Pa. Only change Anthony's name to Todd's."

"Galloping Juniper!" Pa grinned as he looked at us.

Todd took me in his arms and kissed me in a true western manner.

Clapping Todd on the back, Pa said, "Got the best little cowhand in the West, even if she is a woman. Build her up and get that city air out of her and...."

Ma called from the porch. "Pa, you come inside this minute. You always was nosey."

"Galloping Juniper. I was jest...."

"Pa," her voice was silky.

I winked at him, then stepped back from Todd.

Todd allowed, "I sure got me a thoroughbred that's got to be broke."

I smiled sweetly. I saw how Ma handled Pa with a silky steel line, while he thought he was boss man. I purred. "Whatever you say, dear."

Todd looked startled, then threw back his head and roared with laughter. "Think I don't know what you got up your sleeve?" He looked at Ma and Pa standing on the porch, smiling.

I laughed too. At least, I thought, it wouldn't be a dull life with Todd. He wasn't a city man, but he was a whole site smarter than a dude...

★

They Called Me Killer Kate

(*Continued from page* 17)

your place, but they were afraid to tell who they'd seen sneaking around Kate's window after Ramon went in there that night. We finally got the truth out of them and took them to the sheriff in Laredo and they told him their story. We arrested the man and he has confessed."

Valdez was trembling violently. "You have this man? Who is he? I won't believe you until I see him!"

Kim shouted an order back to his band of riders. One of them led a horse up from the back of the group. On it was a man with his hands tied to the saddle horn. His head was bowed, but I could see who it was.

It was Lupe Valdez, Ramon's younger brother!

The old man's face went chalk white. "What are you trying to tell me?" he screamed.

"Just that Lupe killed his brother," Kim said. "According to Mexican custom, all your hacienda goes to the oldest son when you die. Lupe didn't like the idea of playin' second fiddle all his life. He saw a chance to do away with Ramon so he'd be first in line. Men have often killed for less than the richest hacienda in Mexico...."

THE STAGE carried Kim and me on to San Antonio together later that day. That night we walked along the grassy banks of the cool river that winds through the old city. Somewhere in the night air we could hear a guitar strumming and a voice singing a Mexican love song.

Kim's fingers slipped into mine. "Maybe you know what it feels like now, Kate, to get a name you didn't earn. To be hunted for something you didn't do. Maybe you can believe what I told you before. I didn't go out lookin' for the name of a gunslinger. It was forced on me...."

I turned to Kim, my throat hurting. "How can you forgive me, Kim, darlin'?" I whispered. "I can understand a lot of things now. I guess this terrible experience made me grow up. I wish I'd grown up sooner. We've wasted a lot of time...."

His arms swept me tight against him and our lips tasted a deep kiss. "We can make up for it in California," he whispered against my mouth.

"Why wait until California?" I whispered back. "Why not get married here?..."

★

HOT-LEAD WELCOME

by Nola Carew

The last thing Fred Andrews expected when he came back to his broken-down ranch was ambush bullets—and from a pretty girl!

A SPANGING sheet of sound rippled across the hills as the breath of a bullet whispered close to Fred Andrews's ear. Surprise and anger raced through him, but his actions were instinctive. He rolled from his pony and hit the ground, his high body hidden by tall grass, his sixgun palmed.

From the shuttered windows of the adobe ranch house a bright flame lanced. Cavalry, his pony, kicked up his heels and galloped off, hunting for a safer place. Andrews leveled his sixgun at that shuttered window and triggered twice. The sound eddied and echoed over the swelling ground.

Half kneeling, crouched low enough to be hidden by the brush, he watched the house. No reply came to his missiles and he edged himself forward slowly. He could not understand this reception.

It had been ten years since he had seen the low ranch house that had been his home. Gray eyes narrowing on the wind-pitted walls and sun blistered wood brought back poignant memories. The big barn had once been the cynosure of all eyes. It had been painted a glorious red and the clean, white-washed walls of the main dwelling had made a pretty contrast. Bright flowers had bordered its long veranda and the pole corrals had been well stocked with horseflesh.

It was no longer that. The roof looked as if a good wind would lift it bodily. The crimson of the barn had faded to a dirty pink and where the paint had blistered and peeled, were dun-colored spots the size of a man's head. The corrals were empty, and not even a wisp of smoke curled from the stone chimney. The entire ranch looked deserted, ghost-ridden.

But it had been no ghost that had placed that bullet so close to his head.

A hot wind whipped across the tall grass, lifted little whirlpools of dust. The stifling heat of a noonday sun beat against his bared head, reflecting like burnished copper from the fiery red of his hair. It was not more than a hundred yards to the house and with the entire yard overgrown with weeds and grass, he made it w i t h o u t receiving any more reply from his unseen assailant.

He prowled the barn first and shook his head in puzzled bewilderment. Like the corrals it was empty of stock. The bunk house was the same. There were no blanket rolls or war sacks, nothing but the straw-filled mattresses of the former tenants. It gave him a queer feeling when he stealthily made his way through the rear of the house. There was nothing to show that anyone had lived here for years except the coffee pot on the cold stove.

But some one was here. G h o s t s don't trigger rifles. Remembering how the second shot had nicked his horse, made his lips curl in a snarl of rage. Fred's assailant had committed the unpardonable sin of shooting at his horse. Moving soundlessly down the long hall he reached the door of the big living room.

The shutters were closed and for a moment it was difficult for him to to make out objects in the dimly lit interior. Then he saw the shadowy blurred figure slumped below one of the windows. A rifle lay one the floor and one hand still gripped the stock.

"Reach, you bushwhackin' son," Andrews growled, gun cocked and menacing.

THERE WAS no answer and no movement of the huddled figure and the cowboy's hair lifted, an uneasiness creeping over him. Silently he reached the window and the prone figure.

"Gawd Awmighty!" he exclaimed in a choked voice. "I've killed a woman."

The prone figure was a young girl. A thin pennant of light streaking through a shutter touched her dark hair and the trickle of crimson that welled from a wound in her head. One of Andrews' slug had cut a deep furrow along her scalp, knocking her out.

Taking the rifle from her clenched fingers, he got water and turpentine from the kitchen. Propping her in a chair with her head bent back, he cleaned the wound and swabbed it with turpentine. It was the hot sting of the antiseptic that brought her back to consciousness and her eyes opened to focus on him, filled with terror.

"Take it easy, ma'am." He saw the fear in her eyes and tried to stifle it. "Give your head time to clear. I ain't goin' to hurt you."

Clumsily, with the girl's lustrous dark eyes watching him, he bound the wound. The feeling of her soft hair at his finger tips sent pleasant little shocks up his arms. He talked to relieve his tension and hers.

"My name is Andrews. Sunset, most people call me 'cause of my red hair. My Dad used to own this ranch. This was my home. Mom died when I was a shaver and Dad married Mamie Fork. She and me never got along together and when he was killed I pulled freight. I couldn't stand the thought of havin' Ab Carter for a stepfather. I didn't come back expectin' trouble. I proved my right to the ranch, paid up the back taxes, got a deed to the place, signed and recorded with the authority of the circuit court."

The bandaging was finished and he stood there with his hat in his hand, waiting for her to speak, looking down at her, conscious of the smoothness of her cheeks, of the way her lips curved pleasingly, of the deep brown shining eyes. The thought of

how close he had come to killing her gave him a cold feeling inside.

"Why do you tell me all this?" Anger replaced the fear in her eyes. "I know who you are. You're another one of the Diamond Tail crew. I knew you were when I saw you sneaking up the creek. Where is my father? What have you done to him." Her voice rose and her hands gripped the chair arms.

FEARING she was going to get up, he pushed her gently back in the chair. "Easy, ma'am. I ain't no Diamond Tail waddy. I told the truth when I said I owned this Slash 8 spread. I've got the deed to prove it. And I ain't seen your dad. Naturally when you bushwhacked me, I figured Carter was hankerin' to contest my deed with gunsmoke. If I'd known there was a woman, I'd have cut off my right hand 'fore I'd have shot. But how come you and your dad are livin' here? I don't savvy."

His earnestness seemed to reassure her. "Ab Carter owns the Diamond Tail and he warned us if we weren't off this property by sundown last night, he'd drive us off. Dad bought this ranch at a tax sale last year. He's a veterinary. This place was cheap and we figured it would be better living out here than in town. Dad went into town to get the sheriff."

"And he left you here to hold the fort?"

She nodded. "But he's been gone for hours. He should have been back unless something happened to him."

He grinned down at her encouragingly. He liked this girl's fortitude. "There's nothin' to stop us from huntin' him, ma'am," he suggested. "Maybe the sheriff wasn't in."

"But I haven't a pony. Dad rode the mare into town. All of our stock has been stolen during the last two weeks."

Andrews' long lips tightened and his jaw hardened. "Ab Carter, eh? But it still don't stop us. Cavalry can carry double and I'm right anxious to get this ownership thing settled. If you bought this place at a tax sale, looks as if something was wrong. If you feel up to it, ma'am, I'll whistle for my bronc and we'll start.

"Go ahead and whistle!"

Andrews whirled and a piping thin voice warned, "Don't lift it, stranger."

A tall, round-shouldered man, thin as a willow weed, stood there with his gun leveled and cocked. "I ain't itchin' to kill no wandering cowpoke," he said, grinning crookedly, "but I'll shore drill you plumb center if you drag your hogleg. Get out of that chair, Lorna. You were warned to get off this spread. Now I'm goin' to see that you do as you're told. Your paw's dead."

The girl's hands flew to her mouth and tears welled into her eyes. Andrews' glance clashed with the intruder's. If he was one of Carter's hands, he was like his employer cold-blooded and thoughtless of anyone's feelings. It was a callous way to tell the girl that she had lost her father.

"How do you know her father is dead?" Andrews demanded, truculently.

The man shrugged. "We found his carcass over by the north fork of the river. I reckon his pony threw him. His head was all bashed in."

"You lie," the girl cried, hysterically. "That mare wouldn't throw a child. You killed him."

FRED ANDREWS' eyes slitted. Something had clicked in his memory. His father had died in that same fashion, his skull crushed from what had appeared to be an accident. His stepmother hd announced her intentions of marrying Ab Carter almost immediately. Had both of these deaths been accidents?

"I wouldn't waste good lead on no horse doc," the man retorted. "Come on. Get out of that chair." His cold

eyes raked Andrews and he came closer, lifting the waddy's gun from its holster, and sticking it in his waistband.

Andrews helped the girl from the chair and supported her with his arm. "Keep your chin up," he whispered, "and don't let on that you know who I am. We're not licked yet."

The Diamond Tail man heard that and he laughed. "When you both start hittin' the trail on shank's mare you'll think you are. There's forty miles of desert between here and Lordsburg. Ab'll sure send a couple of waddies along to see that you get far enough." Suddenly he laughed again as they reached the yard. "By criminy!" he exclaimed. "Ab'll like that. I'm goin' to tell him we caught you bendin' over Jed Ranz' body. You'll have a tough time sweatin' out of that, my bucko."

"I thought you said her father's death was accidental," Andrews snapped and there was irony in his voice.

The man shrugged and laughed. "Sure, it looked like it, but you can't tell how the sheriff might figure things. Say! What's your name and how come you was coyotin' around the Slash 8?"

"That's my business," Andrews retorted, sourly.

The man had roped Cavalry and the big roan stood there waiting. He gave a neigh of relief when he saw his master and Andrews helped the girl up to his back, then swung on behind.

Two other Diamond Tail cowhands rode up from the creek bed, grinned mockingly at the girl, and gave the redheaded strange cowboy inquisitive looks. At their foreman's orders they kneed their mounts and the cavalcade moved off in the direction of the Diamond Tail spread. Off to his left Andrews could see the jagged crests of the Dragoons, the mountains he had quitted only a few days previous. And he knew that stretch of desert in between. It was bone dry, littered with the bleached bones of cattle and buffalo. It would be impossible for a man to cross it on foot. The nights would freeze a man's blood and the days suck the moisture from his body.

THE SUN HAD dropped behind the crests when the group reached Carter's spread. The girl was taken into the house and Andrews forced to enter the big barn. Here the two hands thonged his wrists with rawhide, shoved him into a box stall, and padlocked the door. It had evidently been built for a vicious stallion. The sides reached almost to the ceiling and it was stoutly built of hewn planks. The marks of the animal's hoofs were plainly visible.

A few minutes later Carter came out to look at the prisoner. He grinned when he saw him, then took a closer look and surprise lighted his eyes. "Damme if it ain't the redheaded Andrews button grown up!" he exclaimed.

Fred looked at the repulsive, hooked nose man who would have been his stepfather if he had remained at home, and his eyes were like blazing bonfires. "You killed my dad, Carter. I know it now. I'm goin' to live to see you swing for it."

Carter fell back from the anger that flared, then caught himself and white ridged his lips. "For a killer you talk big," he snarled. "I've sent one of the boys for the sheriff. He'll be out after supper. And you'd better not get any smart notions of runnin' away. I've given orders to shoot you if you try."

Andrews did not bother to answer. Carter was holding all the aces. There was no use trying to draw to a bob-tailed flush against such odds.

As they padlocked the door, Andrews heard Carter say, "Keep Dora away from him, savvy. She might get soft-hearted and try to turn him loose.

She mothered him for a spell. I don't take no chances with that gal. She's ten years his senior, but he's a good lookin' jackanapes and she'll jump through the hoop for any man that'll give her a tumble."

It made Andrews remember the woman who had been his stepmother. Dora Fork had been twenty-five years younger than his father. She had been a full-breasted, handsome woman with thick tawny hair and green-flecked yellow eyes; a woman whose lips were full and inviting, whose every movement was an invitation to a man. Andrews had hated her for the sidelong glances she gave other men. From Carter's talk, Dora had not changed.

DARKNESS settled over the range. Fred struggled with his bonds and found no give to the stout rawhide. Surveying the box stall he found an iron trough in one corner. There was about an inch of water in it. By backing up to it, by curving his spine, he managed to get the rawhide into the liquid. It was a painful posture, but he persisted until the rawhide began to stretch and he had his hands free.

He had no illusions as to what he was up against. He was a stranger in the county and the sheriff would take the rancher's word as gospel. Once they got him in the jail in Tongwood, his goose was cooked. These ranchers made short work of killers. Carter would poison their minds against him in spite of the fact that he could prove he owned the Slash 8.

Examining the door he found that it would be no trick to force it, but the noise would bring every hand in the Diamond Tail towards the sound and he had no gun. He would have to bide his time. He heard voices from the yard and the sound of footsteps. Quickly slipping his hands back into the rawhide, he stood with his back against the stall and waited.

The door was unlocked and Carter stood there holding a lantern. There were two other men and Lorna Ranz. Her dark eyes as she looked at him were filled with scorn. She came into the box stall with the rancher backing her, an evil grin on his swart face.

"You filthy ambusher," she ranted at him. "I wish I had killed you." Crossing the intervening space she took a quirt from behind her and slashed him across the face. "That's only part payment. I know what you are now. If they don't hang you, I'll shoot you myself."

There was livid welt across his face from the lash and it took all his will power to keep from showing these men that his hands were not tied. He had an insane desire to wrench the quirt from her hand and give the rancher his due.

Carter took the whip from her and pushed her back. "She's goin' to testify against you, Andrews. I just wanted you to know. I was kind of hopin' you might make a break so's I could shoot you down. It 'ud save the county hangin' money." Laughing sardonically he pushed the girl through the heavy door and shut it behind him. The padlock was replaced.

WHEN THEY had gone Fred felt his face and wondered how they had managed to convince the girl of his guilt. But convince her they had and with Lorna standing up before a jury and pointing him out as the killer, nothing could save him. Carter had played his cards well.

An hour later one of the cowhands came back to the stable with a lantern. Peeking through the wire opening, he saw Andrews with his hands in back of him and unlocked the door. He set the lantern down and stooped over to place a plate of beans on the manure-strewn floor.

"Try eatin' like a dog," he suggested.

Andrews moved slowly towards him. Suddenly his right hand whipped out

from behind him an with all the power of his wide shoulders he drove his fist for the man's chin. It was a button shot, perfectly timed, beautifully executed. The cowhand's body arched backward and his body crashed against the boards. With eyes glazing he slid down to a sitting position, completely out, not even knowing what had hit him.

Andrews worked fast. He trussed the waddy up thoroughly, rolled him under the manger in the thickest part of the manure and palmed the man's sixgun. Blowing out the lantern, he closed and padlocked the heavy door, stole silently for the barn's big opening.

From the mess shack came the clatter of plates and mens' voices, but one man stood on guard by the bunk house. Andrews could see the red end of his cigaret butt, like a beacon in the night. Fearing if he tangled with this one, he might bring them all tumbling out of the mess shack, he kept to the shadows and stole to the front of the one story ranch house.

He had just reached the veranda and was about to try the front door when it swung in and Dora stepped out. The light cut across his face, for a moment bringing it into bold relief. Until then he had not realized how much he looked like his father. The elder Andrews to the day of his death had been redheaded without a touch of gray, his skin as smooth and free of wrinkles as in his youth.

The woman's eyes widened with shock and terror. Fred's hands flew out, gripped her tight, and stifled her outcry with his hand. He pulled her out of the banner of light and the door swung shut, leaving them in comparative darkness. She was still a handsome woman. He had noted that in the first view he had had of her. Her hair was still thick, tawny as a lion's mane. Her body was still firm and pliable in his grasp.

She did not resist. She clung to him, pressing her body against his, trying to whisper to him. When he took his hand from her mouth, she moaned, "Harry, darling! I thought you were dead. Ab said he had killed you. Where have you been?"

SHE DID not seem to realize that time had not stopped. She was back in the arms of the man she had married. Through some miracle he had come back from the dead. Andrews did not try to disillusion her. He wanted to get the truth of his father's death. She gave it to him unquestioningly.

"Ab ambushed you, Harry. He told me so. Then he beat in your head to make it look like an accident. He wanted the Slash 8. He promised to marry me. I was crazy about him. Don't hold it against me, Harry. Ab wouldn't marry me. I'm still your wife."

She clung to him, her face buried in his shoulder. He had an insane desire to seize her throat in his two hands, to strangle her until that handsome face with its full lips was blue and swollen.

A gun muzzle prodded his back and Carter's voice bit into him with sarcasm. "That ain't no way to greet your stepmother, Andrews. Why don't you kiss her?"

Fred pushed the woman away from him and his lips turned stiff. "Ab's right, Dora," he gritted. "You just made a mistake. Dad's dead and thank God I know who killed him."

The woman suddenly realized what a fool she had made of herself. Her

eyes flamed with anger. This man who had held her in his arms was not Harry, her husband, this was his son, the lanky kid she had despised.

"You sneakin' son of a mongrel," she cried. "Blow his innards out, Ab. Blow 'em out while you've got your guns in his back."

From the road came the steady chop-chop of a pony and the rancher chuckled. "Keep your shirt on, Dora. The sheriff's comin'. Lorna's goin' to accuse him of killin' her father. While we're at it we'll just make the knot tighter namin' him the murderer of his dad. The Slash 8'll then go to you all legal and proper—with no strings."

It took a moment for that to sink into the woman's head, but when it did she laughed with ghoulish glee. "That's rich, Ab. Doggoned if you don't think up the best jokes. I hated your old man, Fred, almost as much as I despised you. Now I'm really squaring matters for keeps. That will give me something to laugh about to my dying day."

Andrews' shoulders sagged. Carter had not bothered to take the gun from his holster, probably had not realized that he had one, but it did no good with the rancher's muzzle in the small of his back. Nothing short of a miracle could save him now and Sunset Andrews was not the kind to believe in miracles.

THREE RIDERS turned at the fork of the road and came steadily towards the house, drawing rein in front of it. The sheriff, a ponderous big man in a wide-brimmed Stetson slid from his horse and marched toward the group on the veranda. The door opened behind Dora and Lorna Ranz stood there, a slim silhouette with the white bandage circling her dark hair.

"This here is Fred Andrews Sheriff," Carter said. "We found him bending over Jed Ranz this afternoon by the creek. He'd bushwhacked him, then bashed in his head to make it look like an accident. Ain't that so, Lorna?"

Lorna came further out on the porch. With a sudden movement of her hand, she knocked the rancher's gun up, and sank her teeth in his wrist. Carter gave a howl of pain and dropped the weapon.

Fred pivoted on his toes and drew his own weapon, covering them all. "There's the killer of Jed Ranz, Sheriff," he grated, glaring at Carter, "and the murderer of my father. Dora just admitted it to me a minute ago. Hoist your paws, Ab. Hoist 'em or I'll drill you."

"Sunset's right, S h e r i f f, Lorna chimed in. "I heard Dora confess."

Carter had heard enough. He knew he was trapped and like an animal at bay he tried to shield himself. With a sidewise leap, he got Dora's body in front of him and his lips curled in a snarl. "Shoot," he screamed. "She'll go with me if you do."

THE SHERIFF stood like a man in a daze. The sudden action, the way they were all accusing each other had him running in circles. He did not know who to believe. Fred brought up his gun for a snap shot, then thought better of it. As much as he hated the tawny haired woman who had been his stepmother, he could not kill her. He dropped the gun and with a wrench, pulled Dora from Ab Carter's clutches.

The rancher kicked at him, trying to reach his groin. Fred drove a hard right to his face, followed it with a wicked left to the man's midriff. Carter folded up like a deflated balloon. Dora subsided into a blubbering, moaning mass of womanhood on the floor of the veranda. Boots pounded around the corner of the house and Andrews retrieved his gun.

"I'll kill the first waddy that reaches for his cutter," he barked.

"You don't remember me, Sheriff," he said, "but I'm Fred Andrews' son.

I came back to take possession of the Slash 8 and found Miss Lorna holed up there. Carter's men took us prisoners and threatened to run us out of the county. He'd killed Jed Ranz this afternoon and bashed in his head to make it look like an accident."

"It's a lie," Dora shouted, rushing at the girl.

Fred's high body blocked her way. "You never liked me, Dora, and the feeling was mutual. If you'll tell the sheriff the truth, I won't press charges against you. I wouldn't want to see the woman my dad loved and admired do a stretch in the pen."

She looked up at him, suddenly quiet, her glance searching his face. Tears welled into her eyes. I'm sorry, Fred. I'll tell the truth."

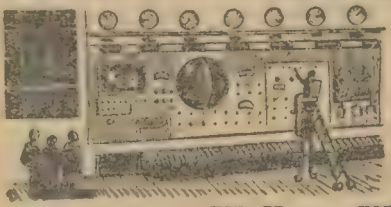
Lorna rode the little mare that her father had ridden back to the Slash 8 with Andrews to gather her belongings. Sunset Andrews lit the lamp and looking at the big living room suddenly thought how lonesome it was going to be in this big house and he looked at the girl whose face was drawn, whose dark eyes were misty with unshed tears.

"You don't have to run away, ma'am," he said, softly. "I was sort of hopin'—maybe—you'd sort of stay and—"

She looked at him but volunteered no help and he floundered on with, "What I mean is—there's a preacher in town. We could sort of ride in—and maybe—get hitched legal. I'd sure be mighty prqud to have you ramroddin' the Slash 8, and—me."

"Sunset," she said, moving towards him with shining eyes. "That sounds like a proposal. Do we have to wait until morning?"

★



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Jubal had tricked her into thinking he was fine and good...

THE CAT MAN

Exciting Novelette

by PERRIN ALGIERS

Chapter 1

THE SCREEN door slammed, and Clara turned quickly from the shelves where she was rearranging bolts of cloth. A tall suntanned stranger, with guns strapped low, walked over to the counter, spurs jingling. He took off his Stetson, whipping trail dust from booted trousers, and his dark eyes were admiring. "Good afternoon Miss," he said.

"They told me at the agency I'd find Major Simpkins over here."

Clara smiled. She might have told him that the Major was next door at the saloon, instead she said, "He'll be back in a little while, if you'd like to wait. And he isn't really a Major, you know, it's just a title given to any Indian agent." Her blue eyes were frankly curious. "Maybe I could help you?"

"You just might," he agreed. "I'm Jubal Lane, from the Territory, and I'm hoping the Major will hire me. I need a job." He canted a hip onto the counter, and rolled a cigarette.

Clara studied him. Few strangers wandered into these vast solitudes where many many hundreds of Sioux had been herded by the government Here the Indians had pitched their tipis by streams, in the mountains, and across the prairie, to live according to white man's rule.

For that matter, few strangers came to Briscoe, the settlement which had been built because of the reservation. Clara was sure that the Major, who administered the lives and affairs of the Sioux, didn't need to hire more hands, either for his own small spread, or to guard the reservation herds. And he appointed police from among the braves, to help keep the tribes in line. But she didn't want to discourage the attractive dark eyed man. Besides, if she told him no, the Major would as likely say yes. The Major was that sort.

Instead she said, "I'm Clara Ricketts."

Jubal raised his eyebrows. "Then Cy Ricketts, the former agent, was your father. I've heard of him, he was a good man."

"Yes," she said quietly. "He was killed about two years ago, by a stray buffalo." Her heart tightened. "The Major had just been sent out as assistant, so he took over." She still looked at Jubal with curiosity. She couldn't understand why he didn't head farther south, where he'd be able

to find plenty of ranch jobs. There certainly was no opportunity for advancement here.

"It's kind of quiet in Briscoe, isn't it?" Jubal asked. "What does a pretty curly haired girl like you find to do?"

Clara blushed, glad he seemed to like her. "If you want crowds, I'm afraid you've come to the wrong place," she said lightly. "I help out here for one thing. This is where the Sioux trade." She didn't add that it was a government store, and that the Major overcharged the Indians outrageously. "Then," she went on, "the stage livens up things when it stops overnight twice a month, going and coming from the railroad waystation. That's about three hours of hard riding west of the reservation."

He nodded. "Didn't I pass a large spread north of here?"

"That's Amos Glenning's, he moved in cattle about a year ago. He might hire you," she said eagerly, "if the Major can't."

She hoped Jubal would stay in this section. There weren't many young men around except Amos, and she wasn't romantically interested in him, even though he'd urged her to marry him. Not even the Major's insistence that it would be a fine match, considering the uncertainty of her father's estate, could sway her.

And Amos understood that she believed a girl should marry only if she were in love, and not because of financial pressures. Even though the pressures were becoming increasingly heavy.

CLARA STIFFENED her shoulders and Jubal pivoted as the Major's voice rose angrily outside the store, reprimanding the squaws who sat in the shade of the wooden awning. He strode in, a burly man just past middle age, with a big mustache. He stopped short when he saw Jubal. He stared at him, and Clara was amazed that there seemed to be a momentary flash of fear in Jubal's eyes.

The Major didn't offer to shake hands, but brushed past to the office door at the counter-end, motioning Jubal to follow. It almost seemed to Clara that the Major knew the man, but she couldn't believe it. However, she realized Jubal had originally asked only if the Major were here. He hadn't said they'd met—or hadn't met.

Curiosity overcame her manners, and she tiptoed to the door putting her head against it.

There was a rattle of the desk's roll-top, and the Major's hard step back to the table where apparently Jubal was standing. Jubal's voice was too low for Clara to distinguish words, then the Major spoke loudly. "Okay, I'll hire you, but you'll take orders and ask no questions. Otherwise you know what to expect." He slapped his fist on the table and kicked a chair aside.

Clara quickly busied herself with bolts of cloth, as the door opened. "Lane here," the Major informed her, "is on the ranch payroll, as of now. Why don't you show him around town. I'll take care of the customers."

The Major's sudden laugh was loud and jovial, and Clara felt a quick fear. She'd seldom seen the Major good-humored like this: once, just before he horsewhipped a brave for unproven thievery. And once just before he refused to issue government beef to an Indian family, accusing it of insufficiently working their cornpatch.

Clara didn't meet the Major's gaze. She'd be grateful when she could leave Briscoe, and never see the man again.

Jubal said quietly. "I'd like to have you show me around, if you will." And Clara slipped around the counter, not answering. He held the door for her, stopping to pat his palomino at the hitch rail before they walked down the high-planked sidewalk. A group of Sioux bucks stared expressionlessly, but the squaws nodding in the shade opened their bright beady eyes.

Past the saloon, Clara pointed out the small hotel where stage passengers rested overnight, the barbershop, blacksmith's and the livery. In front of agency headquarters, she spoke to a blue uniformed reservation police, and introduced Jubal. At the end of the street there was a sprinkle of houses under sheltering trees, and they went on slowly.

"Maybe you'd show me around the reservation sometime?" Jubal suggested, and Clara nodded happily.

"Feeding Indians must be a large job," he observed after a moment.

"Oh, my, yes," she agreed. "The government contracts for Texas cattle. As a matter of fact, a drive is due to arrive any day now with two or three thousand head, and I'm glad. The Indians," she explained, "are in a bad mood. They're hungry, and I don't look forward to some chief sparking an uprising."

She didn't notice that Jubal looked at her sharply. "We're supposed to keep a reservation herd large enough to avoid having them starve, but I guess the Major didn't order enough last time. The drive," she said, "is another thing which livens us up. The trail riders stay around for a few days whooping it up. You'll probably like that and you'll like Tex Harrigan, the trail boss. He's a fine man."

He told her then of a cattle drive he'd been on, and when he finished she asked if he'd met the Major before today, and was glad when he told her "no." But her blue eyes were worried. "Are you sure you want to work for him?"

THEY'D REACHED the small house where she'd lived so happily with her father, and after a moment's hesitation, Clara invited him in for coffee and cake. He didn't answer the question until the squaw who did Clara's cooking brought in the laden tray. He'd been admiring the mahogany heirlooms which they'd brought from Boston, asking too, about the daguerreotypes and Clara was filled with pleasure when he said she looked like her mother. The mother who had died, on the way west.

"About the Major," Jubal said when she'd poured their coffee and cut the cake. Clara took a bite, and waited strangely content. She liked Jubal, his ease of motion, his good manners, and friendliness. Her eyes were soft, watching the expressions flit across his mobile face, and her heart quickened. She was glad he'd come to Briscoe, even though she wished he weren't going to work for the Major.

"Let's just say the Major has a job and I need one. Would you be willing to let it go at that for the time being?"

Clara flushed. "It doesn't concern me, really, does it?" she asked stiffly.

"Maybe it might, more than you realize," he said, putting down his cup to stand in front of her. "I'd like to feel that what I do *does* concern you." And the light in his dark eyes quickened. He turned away to the table. "Tell me now about you, and the men stationed at Fort Collins."

She laughed. "The fort's seventy five miles away, and I never see them unless they're out on a long patrol and just happen to ride this way."

"They're very foolish men," he said sternly. He filled her cup from the pot. "But you know I'm sort of glad they haven't really discovered you."

Clara blushed. After he stirred sugar into his coffee, in answer to his questions, she told him about her life before her father had died. She was honest about it and said that the Major had been helpful and sympathetic. When he found that she wanted to return to Boston which she'd left when she was ten, he'd started an investigation into her father's affairs, and she planned to go east as soon as she learned if there was enough money in the estate.

She told him also that during the past year, the Major had become increasingly difficult to get along with. At least, she thought, it might serve to

put Jubal on guard. But the confidence grew in her, as they talked, that Jubal could be trusted to cope with any situation. He was strong, and there was a quality, a stability about him which reminded Clara of her father. That he liked her, and found her attractive made her happy. Regardless of the Major, it was wonderful to have Jubal here.

Finally he got up. "If I'm to ride out to the ranch, I'd better be getting along. And thank you for my welcome to Briscoe. I hadn't expected to find anyone here like you." He put his hand on her shoulder for a moment, and his dark eyes held that quick light.

Clara leaned against the door frame to watch him walk back to the town-center for his horse. When he suddenly turned to look back, she hurried into the house, confused at having been discovered lingering there.

AFTER SUPPER, she was too restless to embroider and tried to read, but found herself wondering what Jubal was doing. Finally she tossed the book aside, deciding to return to the store to finish the supply list which would be sent out by stage.

The street was quiet, though a light shone from the saloon and hotel. In a few days it would be raucous with cowhands and trail riders, and she wished she were a man. Then remembering the quick light in Jubal's eyes, Clara was glad she wasn't.

She unlocked the door and went back into the office and lit the kerosene lamp. The Major had left scattered papers on the table and she stacked them neatly, picking up some which had fallen onto the floor. The bold words sprang at her from the dodger. *Wanted for Murder. Jubal Lane.*

Shock paralyzed her senses. She stared at it for a long time. Gradually fury built that she'd been wrong in her judgment of the man. Fury at him for offering his friendship and accepting her hospitality, knowing full well that if she'd been aware of the truth she wouldn't have even spoken to him.

She crumpled the paper, then smoothed it out and sat down unsteadily. Now she understood that flash of fear in Jubal's eyes when he met the Major. He'd known instantly that he'd been identified.

Clara covered her face with her hands. Instinctively she'd liked the dark eyed man, and that liking might easily have developed into love. A deep thankfulness welled through her. She'd discovered what he was—in time.

Finally she got up, her mouth firm, and her eyes cold. Maybe she had been drawn to him, but that was over. She hated him now for what he was, a cold blooded murderer.

She'd send word out to the nearest Marshal with Tex Harrigan, the trail boss. It was bad enough that the Major treated Indians as he did, but to knowingly hire a murderer was something she didn't have to stand. Then Clara decided that before she wrote, she'd talk the situation over with Amos, and would ride out to his ranch tomorrow.

But she didn't have to. About noon the ruddy, fair-haired man came through the screen door. "Oh Amos," she cried, "I'm so glad to see you."

He was surprised at her intensity and came eagerly around the counter, "Does that mean you've changed your mind about us?" But he read the answer and moved away to finger a bolt of cloth. "I thought I'd come in for a couple of days, and help celebrate the arrival of the herds," he finally said. When she didn't answer he looked at her sharply. "Is something wrong?"

Words tumbled out about Jubal and the Major's knowledge of his crime.

Amos studied the dodger she brought from the office. "Likely the Major put him on the payroll so the fellow would be sure to stay until the Major can report him and collect the reward."

Remembering the Major's loud good

humor, when he'd hired Jubal, Clara was sure Amos was right. It was only just, that Jubal's whereabouts be reported. She was going to do it herself, yet somehow she wished it didn't have to be solely because of the reward.

"I've just seen the Major," Amos said, "he didn't mention his new hand. He wants us for supper tonight, and he'll speak to you about it later."

The agent invited her only when Amos was in town and this social contact, seldom as it was, suited Clara. She didn't like to spend any more time than necessary with Major Simpkins...

Chapter 2

LATER SHE and Amos rode out to the small spread where the ranchhouse and outbuildings were kept in repair by unpaid Indians. As they dismounted Clara was glad that Jubal wasn't at the corral or with the hands outside the bunkhouse. She never wanted to see him again.

The Major met them and in the sparsely furnished room, saw that Clara had a comfortable chair. He poured wine, though he knew she would only toy with it, and whiskey for Amos. "It's fine," he beamed, "to have a lady grace my board. We bachelors have it tough," and he dug an elbow in Amos' ribs.

Amos grinned, and rolled a cigarette. "Where's this new fellow Major? I'd like to see him."

The agent sent a quick glance at Clara. "I sent him out to the reservation herd with some of the boys this morning. I've had to double guard, because I want to catch some of our little government charges trying to steal." His sarcasm was thick.

Clara remembered that Jubal had asked her to show him the reservation and the anger in her was deep.

He walked in then, his eyes meeting hers, and he must have known that she'd discovered his secret. He bowed, and turned to the Major who introduced Amos. Jubal reported that the Texas herds were just south of the pass, according to the Indians, and the Major nodded indifferently, waving Jubal to the whiskey bottle.

It was then Clara noticed that four places were set at the long supper table, and she froze. She couldn't eat with a murderer, and she wished with all her heart that she han't come. It was an insult that the Major had planned it so. Then she decided he was just trying to keep a closer eye on Jubal's activities. And murderer or not, he certainly wasn't going to chase her out.

Amos was talking as though he didn't know Jubal for what he was, and the conversation naturally swung to ranching. Clara was glad to just listen, though it annoyed her that she was conscious of Jubal's every move.

Then Jubal changed the subject by asking Amos if he'd been born in the west, or had drifted out as he, himself, had. Amos explained he'd come from St. Louis some years back, and ramrodded outfits here and there, and finally set up his own spread not far from Briscoe.

"I was born in the east, like Clara," the Major offered.

"Do you plan to go back?" Jubal addressed her for the first time.

"Probably," she said coolly. Why he should ask was beyond her, when she'd already told him.

The Major helped himself to whiskey and filled the men's glasses. "I'm investigating things for her," he said, "and I hope the estate won't amount to anything, so she'll have to stay here with us." He winked broadly at Amos, and Clara felt hot color in her cheeks. The inference was so obvious.

"How long will it take?" Jubal asked.

Suddenly Clara leaned forward. "Two years seems a dreadfully long time Major."

IT WAS JUBAL who answered. "Why don't you write to some old family friend, and have him light a fire under the investigation?" Then seeing the Major's face with anger, he added quickly, "It's too bad, sir, you can't personally attend to it. You'd get results." Mollified, the Major relaxed.

Clara took a sip of wine. Jubal had deliberately forced the conversation around to her affairs. Did he think that the Major had purposely slowed the investigation? It was an alarming thought, but one she must weigh. She glanced from under her long lashes and Jubal nodded imperceptibly. That she must feel grateful to him was intolerable, and the twinkle in his eye when he sat down at the table when supper was brought in let her know that he was amused at her predicament. She turned to talk with the Major and Amos, ignoring Jubal throughout the meal.

The Major ate rapidly, and pushed back his plate, pouring a drink, while he waited for the others. When Amos had barely finished, the Major asked him to come into the office for a minute and they left the room.

Clara didn't look at Jubal but concentrated on her half empty cup, feeling his dark probing eyes, and wishing she could run from them. But she wouldn't give him the satisfaction.

"I've got to talk to you," Jubal said after a moment. "It's very important."

"What could you possibly have to say to me?" she asked scornfully.

He ignored the question. "I'll ride in late, so wait up for me."

Before she could protest, the Major shouted for Jubal and there was no opportunity, then or later, because when the men came out, Jubal said goodnight. An hour or so after he left, Amos and Clara rode back to her house, and on the way Amos told her that the Major was sending word out by the trail boss, and she needn't worry, the Marshall would be along and pick up Jubal.

She was glad it was too late to invite him to come in, and agreed to meet him for dinner tomorrow, at the hotel.

After Clara stabled her horse in the barn behind the house, she paced the living room floor, waiting for Jubal. The only important thing he could possibly have to say was to beg her not to report his whereabouts, and her contempt grew.

When he knocked, she opened the door. "Well?" she said coldly.

HE WALKED in, and tossed his Stetson onto a chair. "I brought up the subject of the investigation because I wanted to see the Major's reaction. He's stalling, I think, so you'll agree to marry Amos. But what's in it for him? Think about that," he said. "Maybe you'll come up with the answer."

"My affairs," Clara said stiffly, "are no concern of yours. And now, if that's what you came for, will you please go?"

"Oh, but it isn't," he said. "This is what I want you to do." He put his hand on her arm, and she drew back as though his touch had burned.

"You see, I think the Major's selling a good portion of the reservation herds and pocketing the money. And I'd like to have you go through his files to see if you can find anything to indicate this. I can't get to them, and you can."

She started to interrupt, but he went on, "There's no advantage in ordering an insufficient number, the money doesn't come out of his pocket, but out of the government's. Yet the Indians starve. Why?"

Because of the enormity of it, Clara forgot it was Jubal standing there. "But where could he sell?" she de-

manded. "Nobody's going to buy stolen beef. We don't have outlaws around here."

"The Army could; Fort Collins might not even know it, because the Army buys its beef dressed, and aren't interested in hides."

After a moment Clara frowned. "Just why should you worry about all this?" Then she knew. "If you can catch the Major in an out and out violation of the law, you'll have a hold over him and he won't dare report that he's sheltering a murderer."

"That's a logical conclusion, I guess," he said. "And another thing, I don't want you to discuss my suspicions with Amos, because it's barely possible he's mixed up in this."

"How dare you!" Clara blazed. She opened the door. "I don't scheme with murderers, nor deal with them. If the Major doesn't notify the Marshall you're here, I will. Now get out and don't ever speak to me again."

The light in his eyes quickened as he looked down at her. "Are you very, very sure you mean all that?" He picked up his Stetson. "*Are* you Clara?"

He left her then, and she didn't watch him ride off, because in that split second, she'd learned a shattering fact. She hadn't discovered the truth or depth of her feelings in time after all. And her loathing for herself was unbearable, admitting as she must, that she'd fallen in love with a murderer!

THE NEXT day at noon, Clara went across to the hotel to meet Amos, feeling like doing anything rather than this. She was emotionally exhausted and would be miserable company, but she'd promised, and he was waiting.

Rebel yells, and a fusillade of shots, cut the normal quiet, and brought everyone in Briscoe onto the planked sidewalks. In another second, Tex Harrigan and three trail riders pounded up the dusty street. Tex waved his Stetson at Clara and Amos, and pulled up at the agency where the Major tied the buckskin and shook hands with the lean weathered Texan. His riders had already headed for the saloon with shouts of release from the gruelling months on the trail, when Clara and Amos ran up.

"HELLO sweetheart, been true to me?" Tex asked, and kissed her roundly, then turned to the Major, and fished a paper from his pocket. "Here's the count," he said. "We made it, didn't we, before the contract date expired, and it's a fine bunch of longhorns. We'll turn them in to the reservation meadow, and bring a bunch in to the corrals."

When the Major suggested a drink, Clara sent Amos with the men, and Tex said he'd see her later. Another group of riders galloped in, yelling and whooping it up, and Clara leaned against the store front, her eyes bright with the excitement of it. Jubal arrived then with some of the wranglers, and she turned abruptly into the store before he saw her, and her heart was sick with the shame of her love.

Clara saw him once more that day, in front of the hotel, with Tex. It was evident that the Major hadn't divulged Jubal's identity yet, and she could already imagine how Tex' obvious liking for Jubal would turn into something cold and deadly once he realized Jubal had tricked him with his friendliness, even as he'd tricked her into thinking he was fine and good...

Chapter 3

EARLY THE next morning, the Major knocked sharply at her door, telling her he needed her at the corrals to check off names of the bucks, and the numbers of steers each would

have to get. The whole procedure would take several days, and Jubal would spell her.

Clara nodded, and turned back into the house. Her father had never permitted her to watch the issuance of beef which he'd said in a small measure replaced the buffalo hunt for the Sioux. Last year she'd been ill, but there was no reason to refuse, and besides she had a curiosity about the activity.

She changed into a short riding skirt and shirt, and saddled her horse. They rode swiftly then, and Amos and Tex, at the hotel hitching rack yelled and swung out after them. Already the enormous prairie corrals, used only for this occasion, were filled with longhorns. It was like a festival, Clara thought, looking around with surprise. Squaws and children milled in the background, while mounted braves in breech clouts and moccasins waited impassively for the Major's signal. Ranch and reservation wranglers would cut out the animals, taking turns at the dangerous chores.

A table and some chairs had been set up in the dubious shade of mesquite, apart from the corrals, and the Major sat down heavily and mopped his forehead. Jubal, who'd risen, as they dismounted held a chair for Clara, his eyes running over her admiringly. She didn't meet his eye, and tried to still the clamor of her heart, to steel herself against any reaction except anger toward the dark eyed man, and was glad when he sat down on the other side of the agent.

It was impossible not to catch the tension and excitement as the braves filed past, so that she and the Major could double check the names and allotments of beef. Then digging their heels into their ponies, the Indians galloped, whooping, to the enclosures.

"Watch it!" Jubal yelled. A longhorn had broken through the narrow corral gate.

A Sioux's piercing cry shattered the air, and he raced after the animal, his sharp pole lance ready. Catching up with the fleet steer, he leaned far out to one side of his horse, and plunged the lance into its neck. Blood spurted. The longhorn bellowed with rage, and ran out onto the prairie. The brave kept by his side, stabbing again and again, making the kill last as long and torturous as possible.

When the beast fell, the buck rode away, leaving the skinning and quartering to the squaws and children. Later they'd load it on *travois,* and drag it back to the tipi.

Over and over, the fight between steer and man was repeated. As each broke out of the corral, a brave raced after it, his exultant cry mingling with the bawling of the longhorn. It was a gory bedlam that seemed never to end. Clara grew sicker and sicker. She knew there'd be another group of braves, and another and another, to check before this dreadful day was over. Now she understood why her father had never permitted her to witness this savage butchery.

Finally, she couldn't stand it any longer and turned to tell the Major she must leave and caught Jubal's eye. He got up and came to her, "Why don't you leave?" There was deep con-

[*Turn To Page* 82]

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cern in his voice. "This isn't any place for you."

Amos and Tex looked up, from where they were sitting, and her smile was tremulous. "I'm a sissy, I guess." She stood up, and Jubal caught her as she fainted.

WHEN CLARA opened her eyes, she was lying in the shade, and Jubal was chafing her wrists while Tex and Amos watched anxiously. Though they told her to lie still, she struggled to her feet and Jubal steadied her. The strength of his arm made her heart ache with awareness that she must not love this man.

Amos took her into town, but she insisted on stopping at the store, explaining if she tried to sleep she'd only see the red slaughter. He followed inside, and perched on the counter. "I've decided to have a jamboree, day after tomorrow. Tex and most of his crew are coming out. Will you feel like riding by then?" Clara's eyes were bright when she agreed. Then he added, "You won't mind that I'm inviting Jubal?"

Clara jumped out of her chair. "But Amos you must be crazy. You mustn't forget what he is." It hurt, but she had to say it. "The men will hate you when they finally find out about him." She didn't think it was necessary to tell him that Jubal thought he maybe might be aiding and abetting the Major, because the idea was outrageously absurd, and she was sure Jubal must think so now that he'd had time to mull over it.

"Look Amos," she said slowly. "You don't want a girl cluttering up your party, and I don't want to come if Jubal will be there."

But Amos was stubborn. He didn't often ask her to do something for him. He needed her. Put that way Clara couldn't refuse. In the large crowd she could avoid him. Amos told her that the Major wouldn't be along, and that he'd particularly wanted Jubal to go.

[*Turn To Page* 84]

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And when Clara demanded to know why, Amos admitted he had no idea.

Amos left then to say goodbye to the Major and ride home to get the jamboree preparations started. Miss Sarah would help, of course, and Clara smiled as she thought about Amos' housekeeper. Even after her marriage to Billy, the range cook, she still remained Miss Sarah.

The Major didn't insist that Clara help at the corrals the next day, and she judged that Jubal did, since she didn't see him in Briscoe the entire day. Not that she looked. She just didn't happen to see him.

Tex stopped by for her the following morning, and it was a large noisy cavalcade that headed toward Amos' ranch. She'd prayed that Jubal wouldn't go, but he was among the riders, though it was Tex who rode beside her.

Once Tex said, "Jubal's a good man," and when Clara told him slowly that sometimes men aren't what they seem to be, he said gravely, "Sometimes they're not, and you'd better remember that."

She looked at him quickly, wondering if he knew Jubal's secret, but his expression was untroubled, and she knew he didn't. Suddenly she asked, "Do reservation contracts always call for the same number of steers to be delivered?"

"No," Tex said. "It varies because of the Indian census. We guarantee to deliver a certain number, but an agent always orders over and above what he can possibly need, so there'll be no shortage between drives."

"Always?" she asked.

"Sure," Tex grinned. "Why?"

SHE DIDN'T answer. If the Major was stealing cattle, the problem wasn't Tex's. Regardless of Jubal's request, she determined to search the Major's files and if she found anything to incriminate him or indicate illegal transactions, then she'd have to weigh her responsibility and duty. The Chief of Indian Affairs in Washington should know about it, because she didn't feel that the country's charges should be starved, in order that an agent fill his pockets with gold.

The sun rose higher and higher blazing down on the grazeland and the breeze was hot, but Clara didn't mind. She'd decided to put aside her somber thoughts until she got home, and have a good time. It had been long since she'd ridden to Amos' and longer since she'd been to a party.

Ahead, a cloud of dust swirled, and a half dozen riders and Amos galloped to meet them. There were shouts and a milling of horses and men, and Amos, with a wide welcoming grin, turned his mount to ride with her and Tex.

At the ranchhouse, other cowhands whooped it up, and Amos took Clara, Tex and Jubal into the house. Miss Sarah, with her grey hair screwed into a knot, and a voluminous apron girding her ample waist kissed Clara warmly.

She had dinner waiting, and conver-

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sation was sparked with good humor until Jubal asked Miss Sarah how long she'd been here. The housekeeper explained she was the daughter of a cavalry sergeant who'd died in the Indian war, and the ranch had been hers till she sold it to Amos, tired as she was of responsibility. "Amos," she added caustically, "has been losing what sense he ever had. He wants to be a cattle baron, too late, because the baronies are on the way out. We'll be settled here before many decades, and land cut up, you wait and see."

Everyone laughed, but Clara was aware suddenly that Miss Sarah didn't think very highly of Amos, and it disturbed her.

Amos was good natured about it. "Miss Sarah never has approved of ambition," he said. "Look at Billy, her husband. She loves him because he doesn't know what the word means."

But Clara had intercepted a look which passed between them and was glad when dinner was over and they went outside.

THE MEN had finished dinner by now, and were gathered at the corral where they'd marked off the finish line for the three-legged race. They'd set up targets for marksmanship contests, and softened the dirt where they'd pitch horseshoes.

Jubal and Clara were appointed judges, and Jubal lifted her onto the top rail of the corral where they could watch. Beyond, Clara saw Miss Sarah come out, and join Billy who was busy at a spit, turning a roasting calf as dripping sizzled onto the pit's wood coals. But though she watched and laughed, she was never unconscious of the fact that Jubal sat there, and if

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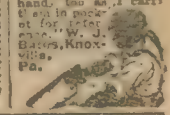

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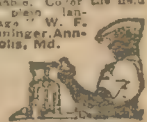

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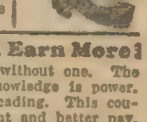

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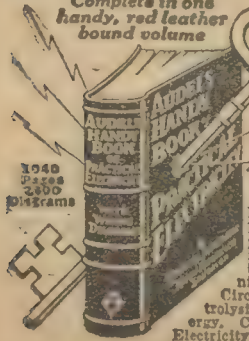

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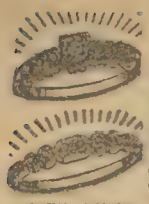

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she'd permitted it, his nearness would have engulfed her. Only once did she wonder, with a shudder, what the men would think if they knew one of their judges was a killer.

When the contests were over, Amos brought out wrapped prizes and a great shout went up when they were opened. As a joke, he'd bought long necklaces of bright beads such as the Indian squaws bought from the government store. Clara laughed until her sides ached. Then she noticed a man and then another go into the bunkhouse, and knew they were going for whiskey. Rather than put a damper on their spirits, she slipped away to the house, glad, really for a little quiet.

Miss Sarah had returned and was rocking and tatting. She looked up as Clara came in. "I like that Jubal's looks, don't you?" she asked. "And he sure is loco about you."

"He's what?" Clara cried. She stared wildly at the housekeeper and hurried across to the bedroom Amos had assigned her, and closed the door, leaning against it. "What a waste," she whispered. "What a waste, if it's true." And she threw herself across the bed, sobbing as she hadn't since her father died.

Chapter 4

A LONG TIME later, when she awakened, the sun had gone down and she heard a guitar. Peeping out of the window, she saw the men grouped around a blazing fire where Miss Sarah was helping Billy. Clara hurried, brushing her hair till it gleamed, and washing her face.

Amos was at her side instantly, and across the fire Jubal sat, light flickering on his face and his smile was warm.

[*Turn To Page* 90]

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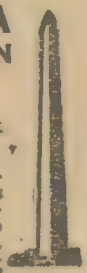
From this → **to this** → 

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It was a successful party, she thought, a bit later, eating the well cooked meal, listening to the tall tales, the songs, and the man talk. Jubal was enjoying himself, the men liked him, and pride swelled in her, until she remembered. She wondered then why the Major had wanted him to be with the party. Somehow it didn't make sense, but neither did his insistence that she marry Amos.

Jubal walked over and hunkered down beside them. "While you were napping, Tex and I rode around to look at Amos' cattle. He has a fine herd. By the way, it isn't far to Fort Collins from here, is it?"

When Amos said no, Jubal lit a cigarette. "Do you ever sell the Army beef?"

Clara didn't wait to hear Amos' answer. She got up abruptly and went back to the veranda, anger at Jubal whipping through her. He'd been riding, and snooping and suspicions of Amos. If he had to, then he should have picked a time when he was not Amos' guest.

Jubal came to her then, and put his hand on her arm, tilting up her chin. "Come on back to the party, and stop worrying your pretty head. Can't you trust me?"

"Trust you!" she blazed. "Why should I?"

"Because you love me, and I love you." He said it simply and took her into his arms to kiss her slowly, then more and more urgently, and Clara clung to him, the world a kaleidoscope.

Finally he let her go, and she leaned against the veranda railing, to still her crazy trembling. "Jubal" she said "we've got to get away from here somehow, fast. We'll go where no one can find us, and change your name. Oh Jubal, our love is good, and our life will be, too. But we must hurry."

"You'd marry a man who committed murder?" His smile was brilliant.

[*Turn To Page* 92]

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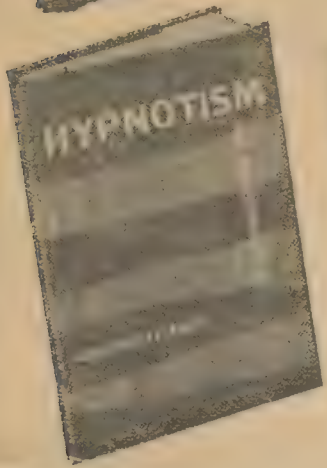

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"I'd marry you," she said.

He didn't touch her. "I'll never forget this darling, but I don't believe even a killer would let you make such a sacrifice."

She was alone, then, as Jubal left her, and she stared after him, knowing she'd been a fool. She'd made herself cheap, talking marriage and planning the future with a man who didn't love her enough. A man who preferred to hide under the Major's wing until he could unearth some scandal, or wrongdoing on the part of the Major, and so be assured of permanent refuge. Amos probably wouldn't bother to report him, and it was evident Jubal thought he might be able to tie Amos in to skulduggery, so that would silence Amos' tongue, should Jubal be able to prove any. And Clara knew that she herself, never would report Jubal. She couldn't. He was safe, so far as she was concerned.

SHE DIDN'T rejoin the party, and when Tex and Amos came looking for her, she explained she wanted to rest before riding home. And was the longest ride she'd ever taken, knowing that Jubal was there somewhere in back of her, as she and Tex led the cavalcade to Briscoe.

Tex lifted her out of the saddle, in front of her house, and stabled her horse for her, then he headed back to the saloon where the others, including Jubal, had stopped, preparing to make a night of it.

Clara didn't light a lamp, but sat at the window trying to plan. Goodness knew how long it would be before she heard from Boston, but she couldn't stay here. When the stage arrived, she'd travel as far as money permitted and find a job. After all, she could cook and sew.

She kept her money in the Major's safe. There hadn't been much on hand when her father died, but Clara's expenses were negligible, and she was thrifty. When she needed money the

Major opened the safe and gave her what she asked for. Right now she wasn't too sure how much was left, but it certainly would be more than enough to take her to the nearest town and keep her until she found employment.

Suddenly she got up remembering that somewhere in the house she had her father's agency office key. She'd find out now about the money. Jubal's suspicions had made her a little uneasy about the Major. It might be that hearing of her impending departure, the Major would tell her she'd already spent all of her money. In that way, he might think she'd stay and marry Amos.

After Clara rummaged through a desk drawer and her own chest of drawers, she found it and started to the agency headquarters. She'd always known the safe's combination, so that would pose no problem. Farther up the street the saloon rocked with noise, and she was glad everyone was still having a good time. She didn't let herself think of Jubal.

After she lit the lamp, she placed it carefully close to the safe, and kneeling down turned the knob, listening for the tumblers fall. In another minute she swung open the door, reaching into the compartment where the Major kept her gold. As she pulled the sack forward, it dragged out some letters, and she picked them up. They were postmarked Boston and addressed to the Major. She quickly drew out the pages, and there it was, the whole sordid story.

[*Turn Page*]

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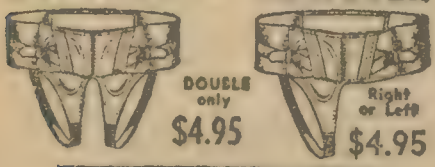

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Her father's estate, a large one, had been settled over a year ago, the assets turned over to the Major, as executor. For a moment Clara was too stunned to move. Then anger rushed through her. She knew this could only have been possible through a forgery, because her father never would have authorized that. He'd had scant use for the Major. She folded the letters with shaking hands, and thrust them inside her blouse. During the past days, she'd found papers which had changed her entire life. The dodger, and these. Jubal had been wrong. The Major hadn't stalled the investigation into her affairs. He'd done even better. He'd stolen her patrimony!

There was a step behind her, and Clara whirled. The Major stood just outside the circle of light and his laugh was loud and good humored. "So you found out," he said pleasantly. "And I suppose you know too, that I've been selling the herd to the Army. That I stock it in a hidden canyon on Amos' ranch and dress the beasts there."

"Amos knows this," she said scarcely daring to breathe, trying to keep down the rising panic.

"No," he said. "You see, I thought if you married Amos, I wouldn't have to do any explaining about your money. I figured Amos had enough so you'd quit worrying about it."

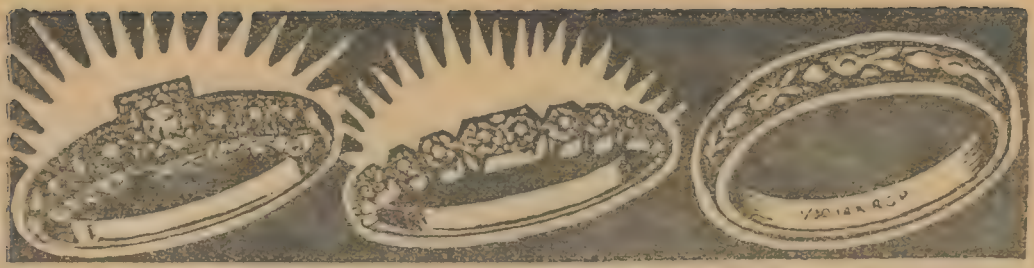
"But why are you telling me all this? You don't think for one moment that I'll keep still about it."

The Major laughed. "I can always shoot some Indian for killing you," he said, "but first." He drew a blacksnake whip from behind him and snapped it back over his shoulders.

"Jubal!" Clara screamed instinctively.

He strode into the room, jerked the whip out of the Major's grasp, and spun him around. The agent crashed to the floor under the impact of Jubal's uppercut, and Tex came in. "Good

[*Turn To Page 96*]



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work Jubal," he said. "I'll take over and you see that Clara gets home. You see, honey, we've been suspecting something like this, because you weren't happy about the stall on your inheritance, and if the Major was guilty in any way, he'd be seeing that you didn't find out. Jubal's been watching tonight to follow the Major if he made any move; when he left the saloon, we followed."

Jubal gathered Clara up into his arms, then, and carried her down the street and into her house. He sat her down on the sofa and held her close to stop her trembling.

"Will you marry me, now?" Jubal asked gently. "You were willing to sacrifice yourself when you thought I was a murderer. I didn't dare agree then, because I had to pin down the reservation thefts, and I was afraid to tell you because someone might have been eavesdropping. You see, darling, I'm a reservation detective, sometimes called a cat man. The last time Tex was here he smelled skulduggery going on and notified Washington."

"Oh Jubal," Clara cried, her blue eyes were brilliant with happiness... "But the dodger," she said after a moment.

"I had it made up and sent to the Major, thinking it might make it easier to gain his confidence." He reached for her, but she stopped him to ask one more question. Why had the Major insisted he go to Amos' party?

Jubal shook his head. "I'm not sure, honey, but one thing for sure, he wanted to use me for his own long range plans and that must have fit into them... He'll spill everything though—"

He broke off. "Honey, let's not waste time talking about the old buzzard right now!"

Clara went into his arms and lifted her face for his kiss.

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TRAIL FOR AN OUTLAW

by Edward Garner

Sundown Kate was the loving mate
Of an outlaw named Spurs Steele;
He held up trains for wrongful gains,
He was a louse and heel.
He held up banks, and thinned the ranks
Of many a posse that trailed
Him far and wide and hurt his pride
With their talk that he should be jailed!

Spurs robbed a stage, and in a rage
Because the loot was small,
He sent six guys beyond the skies
To the last roundup's call.
Men frowned and swore, while sheriffs tore
Their hair, and darkly fumed,
And vowed that they would soon convey
Spurs where a gallows loomed!

Spurs knew the score; his bosom's core
Was deeply hurt and pained.
He winced to think that in the clink
Men wished him bound and chained.
Within a cell, where he would dwell
Until the fateful day
On which a noose would much reduce
Time of his earthly stay!

Spurs, though subdued, was much imbued
With thoughts of pelf and swag,
He got astride his horse to ride,
He built and smoked a fag;
He wore a mask for his dark task,
He made some bitter vows,
And from a ranch on Three Forks Branch
He rustled fifty cows.

The ranchers rode; their riding bode
No good for outlaw Steele,
Their guns were drawn as they rode on
To get the rustling heel.
That afternoon, near a large dune,
They took him by surprise,
And soon they stood by a cottonwood,
And death was in their eyes!

They put the rope that doomed Spurs' hope
Around his neck with care;
Their looks were grim, they readied him
To swing in balmy air.
Hoofbeats were heard; the men inferred
Some cattleman rode late,
But to the group, with a loud whoop,
Came riding Sundown Kate!

Her guns were drawn, her eyes were on
The men around her mate,
Her look was bold, her manner cold,
And her eyes flashed searing hate;
Then did she cope with the ghastly rope,
Her gunfire cut the noose,
And then she gripped her guns and clipped
A stern command, "Vamoose!"

The ranchers left, they were bereft
Of the rope's intended prey,
And Sundown Kate and her outlaw mate
Rode side by side away.
Kate talked with zeal to her Spurs Steele,
Spurs knew that she was smart,
And he agreed and let her lead
Him on to a new start.

Up Three Peaks way the settlers say
The best man that they know
Is Deacon Grimes, who does ofttimes
Great seeds of goodness sow.
His loving mate has the name of Kate,
And I think I can now reveal
That Deacon Grimes, in long-past times,
Was an outlaw named Spurs Steele!

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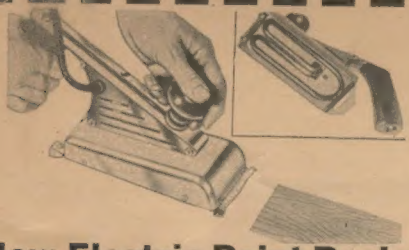

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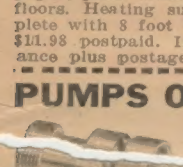

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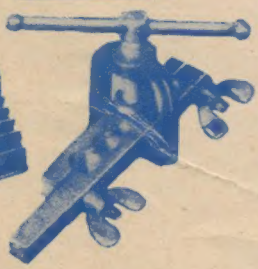

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